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THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

THE *FIVE ADVERTISING SONGS* AND THE *GRAVESTONES AT HANCOCK, N. H.*: A STUDY OF TWO SONG CYCLES COMPOSED BY NICOLAS SLONIMSKY

A DOCUMENT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

By

David Alan Settle

Norman, Oklahoma

2001

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THE FIVE ADVERTISING SONGS AND *THE GRAVESTONES AT HANCOCK, N. H.*: A STUDY OF TWO SONG CYCLES COMPOSED BY NICOLAS SLONIMSKY

A DOCUMENT APPROVED FOR THE
SCHOOL OF MUSIC

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Delightful is the best way to describe the experience of researching and writing about Nicolas Slonimsky. Not only are his compositions entertaining and a delight to sing, but his life's story is equally entertaining and interesting. The author is thankful for the privilege of doing this research and writing.

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THE *FIVE ADVERTISING SONGS* AND THE *GRAVESTONES AT HANCOCK*: A STUDY OF TWO SONG CYCLES COMPOSED BY NICOLAS SLONIMSKY

BY DAVID ALAN SETTLE

MAJOR PROFESSOR: SEAN DANIEL

In the world of music Nicolas Slonimsky (1894-1995) was best known as a writer of words, and he is famous for his contributions as a musical lexicographer. He has edited *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and has written such important works as *Music Since 1900* and *Lectionary of Music,* among several others. He began life in pre-Revolutionary Russia, emigrated to the United States, became a U.S. Citizen, and worked professionally in his field until his death in 1995 at the age of 101.

In a very real sense he was a musical Renaissance man of the 20th century. His was not only a skillful and creative musician, but also a highly skilled linguist and creative word smith. One of the most notable things he is remembered for was his friendship with Charles Ives, and with Edgar Varèse. Slonimsky was instrumental in creating a venue for which their music was first widely introduced to the world.

Slonimsky was also a composer. His works are not widely known, but he wrote songs, piano pieces, and orchestral works. Two song cycles, *The Five Advertising Songs,* and *The Gravestones at Hancock, N. H.*, are probably among his best known compositions. Written with Slonimsky's trademark humor and wit these songs are bound to entertain the most discriminating audiences and challenge the most talented performers. This document is a study of those two song cycles. It explores the creative genius of Slonimsky and, provides the performer with information and performance suggestions for recital programming of these songs.

The study is divided into five chapters. The first presents the parameters of the study which include: an introduction, need for the study, purpose, survey of literature, and organization of the study. Chapter two includes a biographical sketch of Nicolas Slonimsky and a comparison between his writing and compositional style. Chapter Three includes a background and performance analysis of Slonimsky's *Five Advertising Songs*. Chapter four is a background and performance analysis of Slonimsky's *Gravestones at Hancock, N. H.* The study concludes with ideas for further research.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In describing Nicolas Slonimsky (1894-1995) and the remarkable life he led, three traits stand out: humor, irony, and creativity. These three traits are evident in every notable endeavor of his, whether it be as a conductor, lexicographer, linguist, or composer.

This is a study of eleven songs contained in two cycles entitled *Five Advertising Songs* and *Gravestones at Hancock, N. H.* The songs were composed by this most unusual, interesting, influential, intelligent, written about, sourced, researched, and annotated author, linguist, musician, composer and self-proclaimed "failed *Wunderkind*."[1] Ironically, he is not best known for his compositions or his musicianship, but for his work as a musicologist and editor of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. He was a Russian emigrant to the United States who was small in stature, possessed a quirky personality, and who knew members of the Czar's family. His father, a noted Russian editor, wrote the first critical essay about Marx's *Communist Manifesto* ever published in Russia. Slonimsky studied composition with Rimsky-Korsakov's pupil and

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[1]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Nicolas Slonimsky: the first hundred years*. Edited, with an introduction, by Richard Kostelanetz ; Joseph Darby, assistant editor (New York: Schirmer Books, 1994), 3.

Stravinsky's teacher, Professor Kalafati. His aunt was the famous Isabella Vengerova, who taught piano not only to her nephew, but, after she emigrated to the United States, to such noted figures as Leonard Bernstein. Slonimsky's mother studied chemistry from the famous chemist (and composer) Professor Alexander Porfirievic Borodin, member of the "Mighty Handful."[2] The tales of Slonimsky's escape from revolutionary Russia alone would be worthy of a study or of a novel. His eventual naturalization as an American citizen is an interesting and entertaining story as well. The escapades are noted in his autobiography *Perfect Pitch*, written at age 94, and are remarkable in their brevity and matter-of-fact presentation. Slonimksy wrote them in a way that makes one believe he felt as if everyone's life were as interesting as his. The ironic twists and turns in his life, whether it be his genealogy, the fact that he had known intimately both pre-Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary Russia, his being alive during the fall of the Soviet Union, or the fact that he lived so long and was active in his chosen profession until his death, are remarkable.

---

[2] "The Mighty Handful" also known as "The Five", were "A group of five Russian composers who, about 1875, united their efforts in order to create a truly national school of Russian music." Don Michael Randel, ed., *The Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978), 172.

The world of music is indebted to Slonimsky for many things. Among the most noteworthy were his successful presentations in Boston of the music of Charles Ives, as conductor of the Chamber Orchestra of Boston and in other venues, including Paris, Cuba and South America. He became well acquainted with Ives and promoted his music along with other twentieth-century composers, such as Henry Cowell and Edgar Varèse. Slonimsky had perfect pitch and total recall. Late in life he had to discipline himself not to remember telephone numbers advertised on television because they cluttered his mind. He was well known on the academic lecture circuit as a consummate entertainer and as a gifted pianist (he had worked several years as Serge Koussevitsky's rehearsal pianist in Paris and for the Boston Symphony Orchestra). He coached opera at Eastman,and he composed nearly a hundred works, including a few songs, some short orchestral works, and many piano pieces.

Nicolas Slonimsky is best known for editing and compiling the last four editions of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, writing and publishing the *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*, editing and compiling the *Lexicon of Musical Invective*, and authoring the *Lectionary of Music*, and *Music Since 1900*.

Slonimsky's approach to life was logical. His paradigm for life was motivated by facts. Yet, he would somehow rise above that paradigm and represent the facts through his own creativity, humor and ironic wit. He decided early in life that he would live to be 67, but he confounded the actuarial tables, remaining active as a lecturer, and author/editor/researcher until his death in 1995 at age 101. In his writings, he claimed that his "number two"[3] ambition was to be a composer;

> ...pursued off and on, with painful peristaltic effort. The inspirational sphincter of my musical imagination was so constricted, however, that I could produce only miniatures. I was fortunate, however, to have practically all my creations, mostly written for piano solo, published and performed.[4]

NEED FOR THE STUDY

His full name is Nicolas Leonedovich Slonimsky, but he was also known as "Sol Minsky," a nickname (anagram) he gave himself.

---

[3] Nicolas Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch: a life story.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 256.
[4] Ibid.

Musicologists regard him as a giant lexicographer[5], but as a composer he is more leprechaun. His song cycles, though not well known, are performed with some regularity in academic circles. Unfortunately, very little is written about him as a composer. This is not to say that his compositions are not held in high regard. Musicians who have spent some time with his compositions do indeed believe his works to be worthy of study and performance. In his preface to a conversation he had held with Slonimsky and published in *Music Quarterly*, Richard Kostelanetz wrote:

> Were Slonimsky an American football player, we'd speak of him as a triple threat. As a conductor, he directed the premieres of Charles Ives' *Three Places in New England* (1931) and Edgard Varèse's *Ionization* which was dedicated to him. As a pianist, he performed and recorded new music around the world. As an author, he wrote *Music since 1900* (first edition, 1937), *Thesaurus of Scales and Musical Patterns* (1947), and an autobiography (1988). As an editor, he compiled and rewrote several recent editions of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*.
>
> All of this visibility has obscured an activity he has pursued from his professional beginnings seventy five years ago and

---

[5]Slonimsky has been called the "Tyrannosaurus rex of Lex(icography)". He has, in fact, published two lexicons; *Lexicon of Musical Invective* and the *Lectionary of Music*. Taking into account all of his writings, one could conclude that he is arguably the greatest lexicographer in recent and perhaps all of western musical history. The epithet "Tyrannosaurus rex" was given him by Stephen Fry in the title to his tribute to Slonimsky following his death: "Tyrannosaurus rex of lex(icography): A memorial for Nicholas Slonimsky," *The Sonneck Society for American Music Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1996), 12.

> still continues to this day: composing. Since his music is little known and rarely heard, I decided to interview him about it.
>
> I came to this conversation with the sense that his compositions were innovative and unique in ways that his books were not. My secondary hypothesis was that these pieces represented a synthesis of dada and constructivism (to use two visual art categories that are not mentioned in his recent *Lectionary of Music*). This synthesis might make more sense in the wake of conceptual art (which doesn't rate a *Lectionary* entry either) with its radical assumption that an alternative esthetic idea could be more important than its realization.[6]

If Slonimsky's application of ideas were alternative, they were not completely foreign, and they were in fact realized. His compositions have been performed worldwide, notably at Carnegie Hall and Alice Tully Hall before sold-out or near sold-out houses. The late Henry Cowell wrote of Slonimsky,

> ...it would be a great mistake to suppose that Slonimsky has contributed nothing to contemporary composition. He receives much criticism because of the light nature of his works. This giddiness, however, is his much prized specialty! Where others pompously assail the depths and heights, arriving at bombastic conclusions, Slonimsky sophisticatedly aims to glitter---to please for the moment, to be clever,

---

[6]Richard Kostelanetz, "Conversation with Nicolas Slonimsky about his composing." *Music Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (1990), 458.

> amusing. And he succeeds! His music is always delightfully witty, even in his little 'pot-boilers,' of which many are published.[7]

Even as a composer Slonimsky can be thought of as a great teacher. He was a man with a great talent for taking things apart and putting them back together in ways no one else had thought of before him. His *Thesaurus of Musical Scales and Patterns*, perhaps his greatest enduring work, is a masterpiece of that quality.

If Slonimsky's genius was not apparent in his creations, his humor indeed was. More often than not both elements formed a synthesis of style and creativity that is uniquely his and often quite innovative. He did after all regard himself an inventor,

> "I began inventing when I came to this country (United States). I began inventing propositions. You see, I was educated at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, and the laws there were rather strict about composing."[8]

Regarding the word *genius*, Slonimsky would likely object that the word is too subjective. He would probably prefer the word intellectual(ism). In his *Lectionary of Music* (page 188) Slonimsky wrote under the entry *Genius:*

---

[7]Henry Cowell, *"Nicolas Slonimsky,"* in *American Composers on American Music; a symposium,* edited by Henry Cowell, (Stanford CA: Stanford University, 1933), 107.
[8] Kostelanetz, 459.

> "An unfortunate term when applied to producers of literature, art, or music. It is derived from the name of a tutelary deity, and in Roman usage it was applied to a person or his habitation. One does not have to embrace Edison's cynical definition, 'Genius is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration,' to warn critics and analysts to use the word with caution . . . .Popular mythology prescribes that geniuses behave erratically, eccentrically, and unpredictably. Beethoven fits this description to some extent. Bach, however, upsets the popular picture of genius. To his contemporaries he appeared as an honest and earnest worker, modestly performing his functions as church composer, organist, and rector of a boys' school . . . . But Schoenberg, who came close to reforming music and changing its direction, presented the very opposite to a conventional idea of genius. He was bald and lacked social graces, he was not a good performer on any instrument, and he was only a passable conductor of his own works. . . . The romantic picture of a genius at work may be accepted only as a literary or artistic device. Its definition is vague, and it inevitably overlaps such concepts as vituosity, stimulating spirit, ingratiating social qualities, and the inability to communicate with people at large. If one wanted to name a real universal genius, the choice would be Einstein. He also was an amateur violinist, but he was weak on rhythm. 'Can't you count, Albert?' Exclaimed Artur Schnabel, with whom Einstein liked to play Mozart sonatas."[9]

By his own definition, Slonimsky, who excels in virtuosity and stimulating spirit, would be disqualified because of his graciousness, and his obvious ability to communicate (especially with the written word). One might conclude that he was a genius in the spirit of Bach and Einstein.

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[9] Nicolas Slonimsky. *Lectionary of Music.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 188.

When it came to composing, Slonimsky's creations were indeed small most of the time. His songs are no exception. He does not, however, begin an idea without bringing it to its logical conclusion. His songs are witty, entertaining, and complex. They are a delight to sing and to perform, and might be included, where appropriate and without hesitation, in any graduate or professional recital program.

Five years after Slonimsky's death, however, there is an obvious scarcity of research and information regarding the compositions of Nicolas Slonimsky. After all, was an important figure in the 20th century in the field of musicology. Most, if not all, serious musical researchers have had some contact with his writings. He was also a highly influential purveyor and supporter of "new" music and of the composers of such works during the twentieth century. Additionally, many jazz musicians are familiar with and thus influenced by his *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*. The fact that he is not well known as a composer, although his work touched so many composers, musicians and scholars is exactly the reason this research is needed.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The intent of this document is to provide information for a performance-oriented study of these songs. Preparing for performance by

doing background research about the composer, the literature, and the music itself is vital. Although this preparation is not strictly pedagogical in a technical sense, it is absolutely necessary in an interpretative and performance sense. John T. Parrington writes in *Making Music*:

> Interpretation is generally based on thorough study of the score. This is facilitated by background knowledge about the composer, including a broad-based appreciation of the composer's personality, as well as his historical, cultural, religious, and geographic milieux.[10]

Nicolas Slonimsky's life is certainly an interesting mix of history, culture, religion and geography. That is in part the reason that this study is intended to be more than a guide to performance preparation. There is no doubt that Nicolas Slonikmsky was influential as a conductor, lecturer, and lexicographer. It is time for his compositions to gain the recognition, study, and performance deserving of an important twentieth century composer.

SURVEY OF LITERATURE

A computer search of *Dissertation Abstracts* and *Dissertation Documents in Musicology* indicated that no dissertations have been written or are in progress concerning any of Slonimsky's compositions. Articles appearing in a periodical regarding his compositions are indeed rare.

[10]John T. Parrington, *Making Music* (Ottawa, Canada: Carleton University Press, 1995), 90.

Additionally, there is very little published about his compositions elsewhere, except what little he has written in his own books, and a polite reference or two contained in a few introductions or prefaces which are included in his publications or publications about him. In contrast, much is written about his accomplishments as a musicologist and lexicographer. Therefore, this document will not dwell on those accomplishments in depth, but will only note such and recall examples that pertain to his personality, inventiveness, and genius, to enlighten an overview of his compositional style.

Videos and transcripts that contain interviews given by Slonimsky, during the past thirty years in particular, will be examined. Special attention will be devoted to excerpts containing information pertinent to his compositional method and the particular compositions of this study. A complete list of literature is included in the bibliography of this document.

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

Chapter One will include an introduction and argument for the study. Since his life and accomplishments are well documented, Chapter Two will include a biographical sketch of the composer's life and explore aspects of his wit, humor, and genius that are evident in his other pursuits as

well as in his compositions and their relation to his compositional style. Chapter Three will be a study of the compositional style of the *Five Advertising Songs*. It will include a discussion of how advertisements that ran in *The Saturday Evening Post*, could have inspired Slonimsky, as well as a discussion of poetic and musical performance practice. Chapter Four will be a study of the compositional style of *Gravestones at Hancock, N. H.* Slonimsky notes in his writings that a book was published in the late 19th or early 20th century which contained the inscriptions that appear on the actual gravestones that inspired the composition of these songs in the early 1940's. As of this writing this book has not yet been found, but the score indicates the inscriptions themselves can be found at a cemetery in Hancock, New Hampshire. Also included will be ideas regarding poetic and musical performance practice. Chapter Five will include ideas for further research as well as a conclusion of the study.

The songs will be scrutinized in a way that will give the reader strong ideas of interpretation. Elements studied include form, harmonic setting, text painting, instructions of expression, and other pertinent characteristic that provide the assistance for a successful performance. Each song merits its own critique and will be examined with that respect.

Another aspect of Slonimsky's personality and compositional style which will be explored and emphasized is his use of humor and irony. These traits transcended his life and colored almost every creative endeavor of Slonimsky's. These songs are no exception, and will be analyzed through a filter of ironic humor. They are inventive, humorous, and interesting, traits that were apparent in many of his compositions and obvious to many scholars, including Richard Kostelanetz as he wrote:

> Slonimsky's music compositions resemble his prose writing, involving as they do audacious wit and intellectual gymnastics in short forms.
>
> His compositions are best understood in relation to two composers whose works they most resemble: Erik Satie, who likewise specialized in miniatures, and "P.D.Q. Bach (1807-1742?)," the alter ego of Peter Schickele, forty-one years Slonimsky's junior, who likewise exploits a sophisticated mixing of musical styles. The differences are that Slonimksy's inventions are more various than Satie's and more extreme and audacious than Schickele's, which is to say, in sum, more innovative....
>
> To put it simply, Slonimsky the composer is essentially a master miniaturist, with nearly a hundred pieces, none more than six minutes long. However, in the bulk of his compositions is a wealth of uniquely constructivist experiments that, in my analysis, synthesize the intelligence of J. S. Bach with the inventiveness of his friend Charles Ives--an opportune synthesis that no one else has realized as well before or since.[11]

---

[11]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Nicolas Slonimsky: the first hundred years.* Edited, with an introduction, by Richard Kostelanetz; Joseph Darby assistant editor. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1994), xvii.

Indeed the time has come for a critical study of the vocal compositions of Nicolas Slonimsky.

OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

I. CHAPTER ONE
- A) INTRODUCTION
- B) NEED FOR THE STUDY
- C) PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
- D) SURVEY OF LITERATURE
- E) ORGANIZATION OF STUDY

II. CHAPTER TWO: *NICOLAS SLONIMSKY.*
- A) BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
- B) WRITING AND COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

III. CHAPTER THREE: *FIVE ADVERTISING SONGS*
- A) BACKGROUND:
  - 1) THE ADVERTISEMENTS
  - 2) LEARNING THE LANGUAGE
- B) THE SONGS: ANALYSIS OF MUSICAL STYLE AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE THROUGH THE ELEMENTS OF FORM, HARMONY, MELODY, HUMOR, AND TEXT PAINTING
  - 1) *MAKE THIS A DAY OF PEPSODENT!*
  - 2) *AND THEN HER DOCTOR TOLD HER....*
  - 3) *SNOWY - WHITE*
  - 4) *NO MORE SHINY NOSE!*
  - 5) *CHILDREN CRY FOR CASTORIA!*

IV. CHAPTER FOUR: *GRAVESTONES AT HANCOCK, N. H.*
- A) BACKGROUND:
  - 1) THE GRAVESTONES
  - 2) MUSICAL AND TEXTUAL IRONY
- B) THE SONGS: ANALYSIS OF MUSICAL STYLE AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE THROUGH THE ELEMENTS OF FORM, HARMONY, MELODY, HUMOR, AND TEXT PAINTING
  - 1) *VAIN WORLD*
  - 2) *LYDIA*
  - 3) *HERE PEACEFULLY LIES THE ONCE HAPPY FATHER*
  - 4) *A LOVELY ROSE*
  - 5) *IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE*
  - 6) *STOP, MY FRIENDS, AS YOU PASS BY*

V. CHAPTER FIVE
- A) CONCLUSION OF STUDY
- B) IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

CHAPTER TWO

NICOLAS SLONIMSKY
"You Who Hear Everything, You Who Remember Everything, You Who Know Everything."[12]

BIOGRAPHICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Upon examination of biographical accounts (mostly autobiographical) of Nicolas Slonimsky one is struck by several recurring themes or fixations. One is the insistence by his parents, particularly his mother, that he was a born genius, or *wunderkind*, another in a long line of geniuses. His parents, after all, were a part of the *intelligentsia* of St. Petersburg, Russia. In fact he was entrusted with the moniker of genius in the womb. Apparently he did not disappoint, for he was a bright and gifted youth among a class of people that believed themselves to be bright and gifted as well.

It is interesting how Slonimsky felt that this labeling by his parents negatively affected his outlook on life as a youngster. Looking back in a 1979 interview he remarked how his mother's revelation of this "fact" when he was six years of age took its toll:

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[12]Serge Kousevitsky's way of addressing Nicolas Slonimsky. Nicolas Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch: a life story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 102.

> Of course, it's very difficult to recall impressions of childhood without editing them. Now it seems ridiculous to me--the whole thing appears as ludicrous. But just what effect it produced on me at that time, I am unable to judge. But certainly it was just the most hideous thing to do to any child in the light of our present understanding of what childhood is. And as I say, I can no longer recall what the effect was on me, not that I was told that I was genius, but I had to perform the role of a genius, which was much more difficult. If I [had been] told that I was a genius just as a person would say, well, a person is of noble origin, or the person is an heir to the throne or anything then this is something that doesn't depend on his own accomplishments. But if I was a genius, I have to produce, and that, I suppose, precipitated a very, very difficult period of my early adolescence. Because since I was a genius, then I apparently decided that I didn't have to do what other non geniuses do, meaning work. So I even stopped practicing piano, because geniuses don't have to do manual labor. All they have to do is project their genius.
>
> Now the difficulty of my situation was that our family, as all families of the *intelligentsia* in Russia, was poor. That is, the earnings of my father by writing or the earnings of my brother by teaching were very small.[13]

He went on in the interview to cite examples of how some people in St. Petersburg had the luxury of living off their estate, or their success, but that was not the case in his family. He also explained how this notion of genius confused him as a child no matter what his mother told him at such an early age:

---

[13]Nicolas Slonimsky and Thomas Bertonneau, *Muses and lexicons oral history transcript* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California), 44.

> So this created a certain conflict. For instance, other geniuses became more notable or more visible than I was, and perhaps there was some element of trauma. I don't have to tell you that the worst thing that a parent can inflict on a child is to suggest that that child is a genius and therefore he or she is a person apart and does not have to be a member of the crowd. This happens only in the families of the *intelligentsia* or in the royal families, strangely enough. [14]

Living up to the *genius* title proved to be a daunting task for Slonimsky in his youth. He often refers to himself as a failed *wunderkind.* However, he apparently took seriously the notion of being a genius at one point in his life. The idea that he was a failure as a genius is a theme he seems almost to take delight in communicating in his later writings, but at the age of seventeen he was despondent enough to attempt suicide by hanging. Fortunately he failed, and whether the idea of being a failure as a genius was a motive, he could not clearly elaborate on this years later, saying the act was just a ploy to gain attention.

Whether this idea of being a "failed genius" had any effect on his compositional style would be pure speculation. However, it would not be hard to extrapolate this notion into how seriously he took himself as a

---

[14]Nicolas Slonimsky and Thomas Bertonneau, *Muses and lexicons oral history transcript* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California), 45.

composer. Such a self evaluation could indeed affect his compositional style.

Among other fixations in Slonimsky's writings was his fascination with calendars, and skill with numbers. He had an almost savant agility and ability with such tasks as complex calculations. For instance, when given a birth date and year, he could calculate the day of the week a person was born in mere moments. By 1979 at age 85 the calculation took about 2 seconds, about 1½ seconds longer than at his prime. In several biographical entries he boasts he has his three birth dates, due to the differences in the Julian calendar, the Russian calendar, and the Roman calendar, all three of which he was intimately familiar with, and which were in use at his birth. Additionally actuarial tables fascinated him from the time of his youth, when he made out a plan for his life, and predicted his death at age 67. He often boasted in his writings that he cheated the actuarial tables with his longevity.

Another interesting skill he developed was the ability to conduct in two different time signatures simultaneously, a feat he demonstrated often in his lectures as well as in the biographical film documentary *Nicolas Slonimsky -- The First Hundred Years*. He used this skill when conducting Ives *Three Places in New England.*

Perhaps his most prized possession as a musician was perfect pitch, or absolute pitch as he often called it. This was a skill that he was apparently born with, or at least developed at an extremely early age. Sometimes he referred to this ability as a curse, but one senses that in a spiritual way he cherished the skill. He compared the absence of it to being color blind. It might have been a nuisance always to know at what pitch machinery operated, but when combined with his mathematical prowess it gave him some uncanny abilities. An example would be his ability to tell a violinist the precise point by a fraction of an inch, where he would finger on an E string an A, or similar other ubiquitous calculations. Additionally perfect pitch was his ticket into the St. Petersburg Conservatory. His entire entrance exam at the hands of none other than, Glazunov, consisted of Slonimsky's naming the pitches played in succession or simultaneously in chordal fashion on the piano.

Another fascinating triviality is Slonimsky's genealogy. His family is full of interesting characters that seemed to have some connection to some great names in late 19th century and early 20th century history. Just two generations removed his grandfather was a thinker and inventor who Slonimsky claims first invented the telegraph. His father was a published author, and economist. He wrote the first manuscript or critical essay on

Karl Marx' *Communist Manifesto* that was widely published and read in Russia. His mother was one of the first Russian women to attend a university and studied chemistry from the famous chemist and composer, Borodin. His aunt Isabella Vengerova who taught Nicolas piano at the St. Petersburg Conservatory also taught, after her migration to the United States, such luminaries as Samuel Barber and Leonard Bernstein at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia.

When one considers the unusual circumstances of Slonimsky's life, they are particularly striking. Obviously much of what is interesting about his life was due to the geography and timing of his birth. He was set up to witness some very interesting history, then when his longevity is factored in, the ironies that are conjoined out of his life experiences are particularly fascinating.

Most notably he witnessed the birth and death of the Soviet Union. He lived at the center of the Russian revolution in St. Petersburg and witnessed the death of the Czar's regime and the revolution itself. He was himself a member of the Czar's militia, as a band member. He taught piano to royalty. He experienced famine, witnessed starvation and somehow survived. He migrated alone from Petrograd (St. Petersburg) to the Ukraine, eventually landing in Contantinople (Istanbul). During his

migration he wrote to Lenin about matters of impropriety concerning Lenin's soldiers. While in Constantinople he eked out a living giving piano lessons and playing piano in silent movie theaters.

He then moved to Paris where Sergei Koussevitsky discovered him as he accompanied many Russian nationalist singers on the piano. He became Koussevitsky's conducting rehearsal pianist, and finally ended up in the United States without being able to speak a word of English and with a passport that said "No State." His saving grace was his musical skill and agility at the keyboard. It is almost as if Slonimsky was predestined to come to the United States, and his example alone could almost give one faith in that theology.

A much more detailed description of the above summary is available in Slonimsky's autobiography, *Perfect Pitch*. The preceding accounts for roughly 30 years of his life. The really productive time, when he began to achieve professional success, was just beginning.

One of Slonimsky's most endearing qualities was his humor and his ability never to take himself too seriously. Perhaps this was due to his belief that he was a failed *wunderkind*. He did not believe that the bulk of his compositions were of much significance. A few he regarded in more esteem than others; the *Five Advertising Songs* and *Gravestones At*

Hancock, N. H. are a part of that collection as well as *My Little Pool* and *My Toy Balloon* among others.

His most successful compositional endeavor from the standpoint of commercial sales and importance (at least as measured by Slonimsky) is his *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*. This book was basically a mental mathematical exercise in which he sought to categorize all of the scale possibilities when the octave is divided equally. It is an impressive volume of work and is used by composers and performing musicians alike (particularly jazz and rock musicians).

In fact it was his Thesaurus and his work on Edgar Varése's *Ionization* that led Frank Zappa, a notable late twentieth century rock and roll performer, to seek him out and consult with him on some recording projects in the 1980s. In an interview in the film documentary *Nicolas Slonimsky: The First 100 Years*, Zappa said of Slonimsky, "he had a brilliant mind and a very warm hearted spirit."[15] Zappa was particularly impressed with his wardrobe, "he had that look, a look of a real guy from that era; his shoes, his crinkled tweed sport coat, trousers that were too short, he was wonderful - a fully developed character."[16]

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[15]Nicolas Slonimsky, John Huszar, Michael York, eds. *A touch of genius: The life and times of Nicolas Slonimsky: the first hundred years.* (Los Angeles: Film America Inc., 1994).
[16]Ibid.

From the time he first came to the United States, Slonimsky led a busy life. First of all he had to learn the language. As most students of a new language he had the most trouble with idioms and certain unfamiliar usage's. He found the music (particularly the patter songs) of Gilbert and Sullivan to be a tremendous enlightenment on these somewhat illogical complexities of English. In addition he spent much time reading newspapers and magazines.

It was from those readings that the inspiration for the *Five Advertising Songs* came. He lightheartedly boasts that he was the first to put advertising to music. He began playing and teaching for the new opera studio at the Eastman School of Music. It was this job that brought him to the United States. While at Eastman he took conducting lessons from Albert Coatis. Later his association with Koussevitsky was reestablished as the famous conductor became the leader of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Slonimsky's relationship with Koussevitsky was not without turmoil. After a few years their association ended following the publishing of a newspaper article in the Boston Globe. The article was a feature on famous Bostonians and their personal secretaries. Apparently Koussevitsky, whose English language skills were tepid at best, associated the page placement of

a photo of Slonimsky and a derogatory quotation (not related to Slonimsky or Koussevitsky). From Slonimsky's viewpoint, paranoia apparently won Koussevitsky over and Slonimsky was eventually fired.

At that point Slonimsky began conducting professionally. He had already forged a relationship with Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, and Edgar Varése. So he began performing the works of these composers (along with others) with the Boston Chamber Orchestra (an organization which he began). Ives, who obviously had money, then sponsored a performance in Paris. Among other notable works premiered there by Slonimsky were Ives' *Three Places in New England* and Varése's *Ionization*. Slonimsky became an 'instant success'. His fame and fortune as a conductor were not long lived, however.

He found the audience on the United States West coast to be haughty towards these "new" sounds. His final engagement as a "world renowned" conductor was held at the Hollywood Bowl. The several concerts he presented there were met with critical hostility. Ironically they would prove to be the turning point not only in Slonimsky's career, but also in the development of another famous twentieth century composer.

John Cage was in attendance at every concert Slonimsky conducted at the Hollywood Bowl. He stated in a filmed interview, "Those first

concerts he (Slonimsky) conducted at the Hollywood Bowl were a great experience for me . . . . They gave such a wide and rich view of twentieth century music. Those concerts were not popular, they were statements of belief. The people that attended them wanted to attend them..... Those concerts in the Hollywood Bowl changed my life."[17]

Of course, at the time Slonimsky did not know Cage was in the audience. If the unpopularity of the concerts and the fact that they ended his conducting career ever made him bitter, it was not a bitterness that tainted him for long. However, one senses in his writings and interviews a feeling of vindication, because many of those controversial pieces he premiered are now standards in concert performance. There is perhaps a hint of pride in the tone of those recollections as well, due to the fact that men such as Cage were inspired by his concerts.

Although he was finished as a conductor by the end of the fourth decade of the twentieth century, Slonimsky's talents and gifts as a linguist, fact finder, and writer would propel him to success for the remaining sixty years of his life. In 1925 he met Dorothy Adler whom he later married. She was a columnist who resided in Boston and wrote for the *Christian*

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[17]Nicolas Slonimsky, John Huszar, Michael York, eds. *A touch of genius: The life and times of Nicolas Slonimsky: the first hundred years* (Los Angeles: Film America Inc., 1994).

Science Monitor. Slonimsky began writing a music column for that publication as well, and not long after he compiled and had published *Music Since 1900*. Some time after that book was published he was hired to edit *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. These endeavors, the details of which can be found in his autobiography *Perfect Pitch*, kept him busy along with lecturing, composing, traveling, and performing, throughout the remaining decades of his life.

SLONIMSKY'S STYLE IN PROSE AND MUSIC[18]

Nicolas Slonimsky died on December 25, 1995 at the age of 101. One senses that had he had the opportunity to write his own obituary it would have been an irreverent humorous account (although not cruelly so) of a truly remarkable man. As a historian and musicologist, life and longevity were facts that he dealt with if not daily, at least periodically. He referred to the recently deceased as "new stiffs" when updating his obituary

[18]Out of respect to the memory and conscience that guided Slonimsky it would be a gross injustice to characterize these "stylistic observations" as highly critical. They are just that: observations. The writer of this document is neither an expert or claims to be an expert in language or language arts, or for that matter musical theory and style. The writer is a performer and offers these observations as enlightenment and justification for his musical interpretation.

file. He found it somewhat amusing when his own death was wrongly reported in some publications in the early 60's. On the other hand he found it horrifying when his own editing failed to rectify such mistakes before they made it into print in Baker's.

One senses that Slonimsky loved facts. He seemed to take delight in uncovering previous editorializing about such things as the weather at Mozart's funeral, or the scandalous editorial accounts of Beethoven and a so called relationship with his nephew, or even speculation about whether Tchaikovsky's death was a suicide. It is as if he enjoyed debunking popular myths about the deceased, because myths did not stimulate him, facts did.

His prose writing follows a humorous clipped style. He had such a command of language that it did not take many words for him to communicate his thoughts and present the facts. However, he not only wrote the facts, but he laced them with tremendous humor and quips. Sometimes in a book of facts or definitions, he would insert a definition just for comic relief, and or editorial comment. The following from the book *Nicolas Slonimsky: The First Hundred Years* illustrates just that:

> (Music Since 1900)
> **Anti-Music.** ANTI-MUSIC is a concept formulated by analogy with the hypothetical phenomenon of Anti-Matter, in which the electrical charges of subatomic particles are

> reversed, so that the physical encounter between matter and Anti-Matter would result in mutual annihilation. ANTI-MUSIC reverses the acoustical charges of consonances and dissonances. The valences in the series of overtones are similarly reversed, so that the diminishing intervals in the upper part of the harmonic series are regarded as increasingly euphonious concords, and those close to the fundamental tone as discords, requiring a resolution. A manual of ANTI-MUSIC of this nature would then be taught in elementary schools along with the physical principles of anti-matter. But old music would not be entirely excluded. In special seminars, courses will be given in ANTI-ANTI-MUSIC, in which consonances will regain their respected status, while dissonances will once more be relegated to a dependency. It is even possible that in the fantastic world of ANTI-MUSIC, tolerance will be granted to such teratological practices as those of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Debussy and Schoenberg.[19]

Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians as well as *Music Since 1900* contain several of these kinds of entries. They are collections of miniature gems of humor, fact, curiosity, and opinion (especially when it comes to describing the competency of previous editors and compilers).

Similarly Slonimsky's compositions are also a collection of miniature gems and are often humorous. As John Cage said,

> He seems to make everybody around him happy and often laughing. His own music .....can arouse laughter. Besides

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[19]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Nicolas Slonimsky: the first hundred years*. Edited, with an introduction, by Richard Kostelanetz; Joseph Darby assistant editor (New York: Schirmer Books, 1994), 312.

> being merciful or humorous his music is also inventive. I can't imagine Slonimsky takes seriously the idea of being a genius - maybe having to be one inspires this sense of humor he carries with him wherever he goes.[20]

As a composer he is a self described miniaturist. His compositions, indeed, are predominantly short pieces, similar to his prose writing, that lend themselves to his signature style of wit. If his music isn't humorous, often the subject matter is. One can't imagine the marriage of the two without a blending of irony, creativity, and humor. The scores themselves are often laced with humorous interpretative instructions. Consider, for instance, the subject matter in one of the *Five Advertising Songs*, *"Children Cry for Castoria."* When Slonimsky offers the interpretive instruction, *fecalmente*, above the score how does one portray or act out his interpretation? Obviously there is an undertone of humor being communicated from the composer to the performers. The performers (both accompanist and singer) must then do their best to communicate the composer's intentions to their listeners.

Different subjects obviously require different creative approaches. However, even with a more serious subject such as grave stones and the epitaphs upon them, Slonimsky's humor is still apparent. Admittedly some

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[20]Nicolas Slonimsky, John Huszar, Michael York, eds. *A touch of genius: The life and times of Nicolas Slonimsky: the first hundred years* (Los Angeles: Film America Inc., 1994).

settings are more sentimental than others, but one can only describe the accompaniment to *Stop My Friends As You Pass By* from *Gravestones at Hancock, N. H.* as hilarious. It is as if Slonimsky makes fun of convention. As one sings this song about an untimely death of a young father, Slonimsky brings out the irony and thus the humor of life and death with his silent movie (tone poem) piano style accompaniment. "Father" being crushed by the tree is like watching Laurel and Hardy lift a piano up a huge flight of stairs only to watch it ultimately fall in comical fashion, crushing whatever unlucky soul it lands upon.

Humorous moments are often wrought from tragic events. Slonimsky was witness to his share of tragedy, as he watched his own people starving to death and suffering in other unspeakable ways during the Russian Revolution. Slonimsky survived. Thankfully his genius and his humor survived as well.

CHAPTER THREE

FIVE ADVERTISING SONGS

INSPIRATION

Nicolas Slonimsky began composing as a child, however he did not take his composing seriously until after he came to the United States. It was during his stay in Rochester, New York, while he was a member of the faculty at Eastman School of Music that Slonimsky submitted one of his songs (written to the words of Oscar Wilde's *Silhouettes*) in a contest held at the school. Of course he did not realize the contest was for students, not faculty. However his song won first prize, and then it was discovered it was written by Slonimsky. He subsequently apologized for submitting it, but he continued to compose, perhaps encouraged by his success in the contest.

It was during his tenure at Eastman in 1925, that Slonimsky composed the *Five Advertising Songs*. He elaborates on that time when he was struggling to master the English language and earn a living in a strange country;

> Parallel to my learning the English language from Oscar Wilde and Dickens and a little Shakespeare and, anyway, very literary and very polysyllabic sources, I was fascinated by the type of American language which found its reflection in the advertising section of newspapers, but particularly the *Saturday Evening Post*, which I read voraciously. I thought that those advertisements were extremely revealing of the

> *Homo Americanus*, or perhaps of our society in general. I was particularly fascinated by the advertising (incidentally not so much different from advertising that goes on in TV commercials now, but this was my first acquaintance with this type of advertising) where all you had to do was to use a certain type of toothpaste and then you had immediately acquired happiness and success in society and so forth. And then all kinds of ailments that could be remedied by pills. And such fascinating advertisements as "Children Cry for Castoria." You don't see those advertisements much now; I mean it's all covered up. But at that time, fifty years ago (from a March 1977 interview), it was very blatant and, as I said, very appealing. I still remember the illustrations of those advertisements. For instance, there was an advertisement showing a bearded doctor, fully dressed--not in white but in black, you know, like nineteenth-century doctors--looking at a young woman and in fact pointing an accusing finger at her. And the caption was, "And then her doctor told her." So you expect the worst. Well, it turns out she had some problems with her "faulty elimination." This was the kind of language used then. So I set this particular advertisement to music, very emotional, inflated, dramatic harmonies and melodies. And then of course "Children Cry for Castoria"--that was for falsetto voice. And other things. "No More Shiny Nose"--that was another thing. And "Make This A Day of Pepsodent," and so on and so forth.[21]

Slonimsky went on to describe in the interview how his colleagues at Rochester enjoyed these songs. Also worth mentioning were his failed attempts, some twenty five years after they were composed, to get the songs published because the companies whose products were depicted did not

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[21]Nicolas Slonimsky and Thomas Bertonneau, *Muses and lexicons oral history transcript* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California), 73-74.

want to be accused of false advertisement. It was not until the late 1980s that the songs were published at large.

The advertising industry in the beginning of the 20th century depended on the words to help paint the picture, even though they appeared in print with illustration. The messages were very descriptive, almost poetic. There were no color moving pictures or sound bites to impress the mind. In order to provide stimulation the advertisements had to be very imaginative and often very original as they attempted to gain the reader's attention.

Slonimsky shows a remarkable understanding not only of language but culture in his musical depictions of these sign posts for merchants. They show not only his understanding of language and culture, but are a remarkable display of his wit and understanding of humor. "His humor is always partly textual, but there is also genuine satire in the music itself," wrote Henry Cowell. He continued, "His *Studies in Black and White* will relieve the funereal aspect of any modern program; his settings of well-known advertisements to song are classics."[22]

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[22]Henry Cowell, "*Nicolas Slonimsky,*" in *American Composers On American Music; a symposium edited by Henry Cowell* (Stanford CA: Stanford University, 1933), 107-108.

Slonimsky's songs not only amuse the audience, they amuse the performer and accompanist as well. With such "tongue in cheek" interpretative markings as *fecalmente*, *confidenzialmente*, and *salivando* (which the audience will never see), Slonimsky aims to entertain both the listener and the performers. In fact this 'hidden' humor communicates implicitly the attitude of interpretation, it also adds a bit of risk to performance which makes it more exciting.

For example the songs were meant to be performed "straight" (as the term applies to interpretation, not vocal production); presented in a serious manner, which adds to the humor and makes the silliness of the material even funnier. In this method of performance there is always a risk that the singer, in his highbrow reactions to the (hopeful) laughter of the audience, could lose his composure. There is also the added dimension and risk of singer and accompanist locking eyes and subsequently falling apart *ALA* Harvey Korman and Tim Conway in a *Carol Burnett Show* sketch.

These songs reach an audience best when performed with a legitimate voice. The interpretation of a trained singer should add to the dimension of humor suggested above. Doing whatever is appropriate in interpreting these songs is fine, if it involves certain inflections of the voice, falsetto when called for, or other vocal effect. Additionally, when a

performer can acknowledge the audience and stay in character, especially in an intimate setting, he achieves a higher level of interpretation and communication that makes the performance more real and enjoyable.

After examining some of the advertisements, which might have been the inspiration for the songs, it is obvious than Slonimsky used poetic license by editing the verbiage to fit his purpose. The song lyrics themselves contain some actual phrases from the advertisements. Slonimsky essentially assembled the phrases of each ad in a more cryptic, yet poetic fashion, to fit the rhythmic and melodic dictates of each song.

MAKE THIS A DAY OF PEPSODENT

Make this a day you never will regret it;
Here is your chance. So take it now!
A perfect toothpaste has been created .
The name of it .....is Pepsodent!

It brings to you new beauty new emotion.
It means to you new safety new delight.
Do not reflect, as for a ten days portion.
Make this a day.....of Pepsodent.

Film on your teeth ferments and forms acid,
That vicious film that clings to teeth.
Use Pepsodent, the dentists all advise it.
And watch its wondrous natural effect.

See how your teeth become so white and shiny!
See how your mouth enjoys a new delight.
Make this a day, you never will regret it!
Make this a day, a day of Pepsodent!

Fig. 1. Text for *Make This A Day of Pepsodent.*

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It is quickly apparent that Slonimsky had a good command of the language and particularly good instincts when he composed *Make This a Day of Pepsodent.* The text is very similar to a campaign speech. "Vote for Pepsodent it will make you happier, help you feel better, sleep better; You'll never regret it! Tell your friends! Vote for Pepsodent!" It is very much that type of song and should be delivered that emphatically. Although Slonimsky did not write the text his instincts for its natural humor were exceptional. "I fully appreciated the rich verbalization of changing vowels in the resonant appeal 'Make this a day of Pepsodent!,"[23] he wrote in his autobiography *Perfect Pitch.*

The song is forty-one measures in length and takes approximately one minute and fifty five seconds to perform. Slonimsky chose D flat major as the key signature for the song, although it naturally explores other

[23]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch: a life story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 88.

harmonies. It is no mistake that there is a very strong tonality in the piece and it is written in late Romantic style. About this piece Slonimsky wrote, "I set these poetic effusions to appropriate music. The Pepsodental toothpaste was squeezed out in *Mussorgskyan* recitative, warning the user that 'film on your teeth ferments and forms acid.'"[24] Although there is no question the song is declamatory, it still possesses a lyricism that in the author's opinion lifts the style above that of recitative. Because there is much pleading involved in the text, the delivery demands some "milking" of the words and this can only be done in a sustained lyrical fashion.

The song opens with an augmented D flat chord in second inversion. The contour of the melody in the opening motive rides on top from A to C to B flat and E flat. The most striking aspects of the accompaniment are the octaves in both the left and right hands. The right hand is more melodic than the left hand, and gives the accompaniment a thick romantic, although chromatic, flavor.

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[24]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch: a life story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 89. The author of this document does not believe that this particular piece is *Mussorgskyan*. The fourth song in the cycle, *No More Shiny Nose!* more closely represents a Mussorgskyan recitative. It is the belief of the author that while writing his autobiography Slonimsky simply made an error in his description. Although it is rife with chromatic harmonies, this song still has too much melodic contour and a lyrical style to be considered recitative.

The song is basically in a strophic form of the pattern (ab);(a'b'), with some minor differences in the final measures of the b sections. The contour of the melody follows very much how one might imagine a soap box raconteur inflecting his voice to sell his wares. The opening two phrases measure-5 through measure-13 are dramatically "low key," setting the audience up for an emotional response. On measure-14 the word *emotion* reaches a new height (C-2), likewise in measure 17 the word *de(light)* (D flat-2) is climatic and the following word *Do* (D flat-2 as well) is emphatic. The ending of this section of the melody in A flat over a D flat major chord on the syllables "*day of -so-dent*" is a foreshadowing of the climatic ending of the piece and offer no harmonic peace or resolution themselves at this point in the song. The fact that there is a *ritard* written in at this point in the song is an indication that Slonimsky wants added emphasis of the non-resolution and the words.

The final three measures set the audience up for the surprise ending. Each of Slonimsky's songs seems to contains a surprise of some sort. The ending of the 'a' section was a dogmatic A flat (melody) over a D flat major chord. Harmonically the ending of the song sets up exactly the same, however the final melodic note is not an A flat, nor a D flat, but an F over a very thinly crafted D flat harmony. Although the spelling seems

harmonically stark, the effect is unusual especially since the final melodic note, which should be sung in full operatic vocal fashion on a *fortississimo*, is the third of the chord. The *ritard* here gives added time for emphasis and the stress markings in the accompaniment should be followed for added emphasis. The singer should take his time getting off the final note for whatever dramatic effect or interpretation he can achieve. If he needs a breath he can take a quick catch breath after one or both of the words *day* in the final phrase (see Fig. 2).

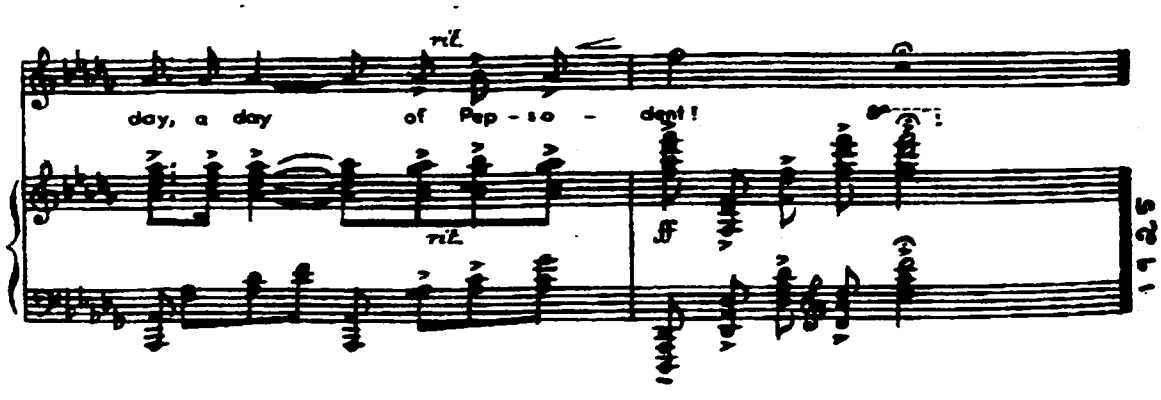

Fig. 2. Final two measures and final phrase of *Make This A Day of Pepsodent.*

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The vocal range for this song is nearly 2 octaves, from large G to F1. Although the *tessitura* is medium to low, the range makes the song more

suitable for a maturing to advanced baritone; one that has a good command of the chest voice and low resonances and can sing a high F in full voice.

AND THEN HER DOCTOR TOLD HER

And then her doctor told her....
For sometime she had not been herself...
She was run down, languid, tired, each day before her work began....

One day she called on her doctor
He advised to eat bran muffins made according to Pillsbury's recipe,
Pillsbury's marvelous natural laxative....

He knew the underlying cause of her trouble.
It was a result of faulty ..... Elimination.

Eat bran muffins!
There is health and delight in every bite.....
And this her doctor told her.....

Fig. 3. Text for: *And Then Her Doctor Told Her*

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This song is a perfect example of a parody from both a musical and textual standpoint. Slonimsky is a master at taking advantage of all of the textual innuendoes. It is easy to picture a person gossiping about a friend adding inflection and expression to spice the story up a bit. The accompaniment, the melody, the funny (nontraditional) expression marks

are all a part of a perfect interpretative performance of how such a conversation would transpire.

To help set the scene one can ponder the mind of Slonimsky through his words:

> I also appreciated the somber report 'And then her Doctor Told Her,' accompanying a scene in which a family doctor, attired in a formal three-piece dark suit, wearing a gold watch on a chain in his waistcoat pocket, pointed an accusatory finger at a dejected female figure in an armchair. It was pure Aristotle: fear and pity resolved in the catharsis when it was made plain that the patient had nothing more than intestinal irregularity, easily corrected by Pillsbury's natural laxative encapsulated in bran muffins.[25]

With that picture in mind, a little stage direction is appropriate. After the sound clears from the piano sound board from the previous song, the singer can begin rolling his eyes left and right as if to make sure there are no eavesdroppers. The first three chords are indeed somber tones; the singer should continue to appear nervous, as if he has extremely important information to impart to his imaginary companion (the audience). This moment can be electrifyingly funny if the singer milks it for all it's worth. The somber report delivered not too fast and with crisp diction, "And then her doctor told her..." Sets up the rest of the song beautifully.

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[25]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch: a life story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 88.

The singer can look again for unwelcome passersby during the next three chords and continue on with the same serious delivery style being careful to follow the dynamic markings and to emphasize with onomatopoetic expressiveness, the words "she was run down". Slonimsky wrote of this passage, "I appreciated the plight of the 'irregular' female, who was 'run down, tired, languid before each day began,' and I set this passage to the chime-like progressions borrowed from Rachmaninoff's *Prelude in C-Sharp Minor*."[26] The diction should be crisp, and at the same time a lyrical connection should be maintained through each phrase. This will make a nice contrast to the chime like accompaniment which, except for one sustained chord, continues through the end of this passage in measure nine.

This song is through composed, except for the opening and ending phrase there are no repeated sections in the song. Thus it is in the pattern A:B:C:codetta. At measure ten the tremolo in the right hand in E-flat signifies the beginning of the good report or at least the prescription for the poor woman's plight. Care should be taken with the rhythm in this section. It is easy to slow down the delivery of "made according to Pillsbury's

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[26]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch: a life story"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 89.

recipe, Pillsbury's marvelous natural laxative," because of the internal *accelerando* built into the ending of this phrase.

The next phrase is, as indicated in the score, very lyric. However it is here that the surprise occurs in this song. Slonimsky's expression mark here, although nontraditional, should be obeyed explicitly. It is here that he directs *confidenzialmente* above the words, "a result of faulty," followed by the syllables "e-li-mi-na-tion." This is the climatic point of the song. The singer must deliver them with crisp diction and high energy. Each syllable should be emphasized in the word "elimination" and if possible a whisper or breathiness should be effected in the voice. This is, after all, the crucial confidential information that makes this gossip so valuable. It should be treated with the respect and care it deserves.

Through the end of the song, the singer should not lose composure and should maintain character never cracking a smile, always aware of his surroundings. One can tread to the edge of broad interpretation with this song and probably not go too far. Slonimsky would most likely approve; he in effect gave permission with his expression marks. For instance, he directs *salivando* above the words "(de)light in every bite...." One could and probably should salivate, licking lips, tasting those steaming hot bran muffins as they pop out of the oven and into the imagination.

With a medium tessitura and a less challenging vocal range, from low A to D1, this song is easier to negotiate than the preceding song. However the singer must still master a rather difficult rhythmic section from measure-13 to measure 15 (see illustration measure-12 to measure-15 below), along with some challenging chromatic harmony in the melody in that section. A high degree of concentration is required, thus making the song suitable for students with maturing or advanced experience.

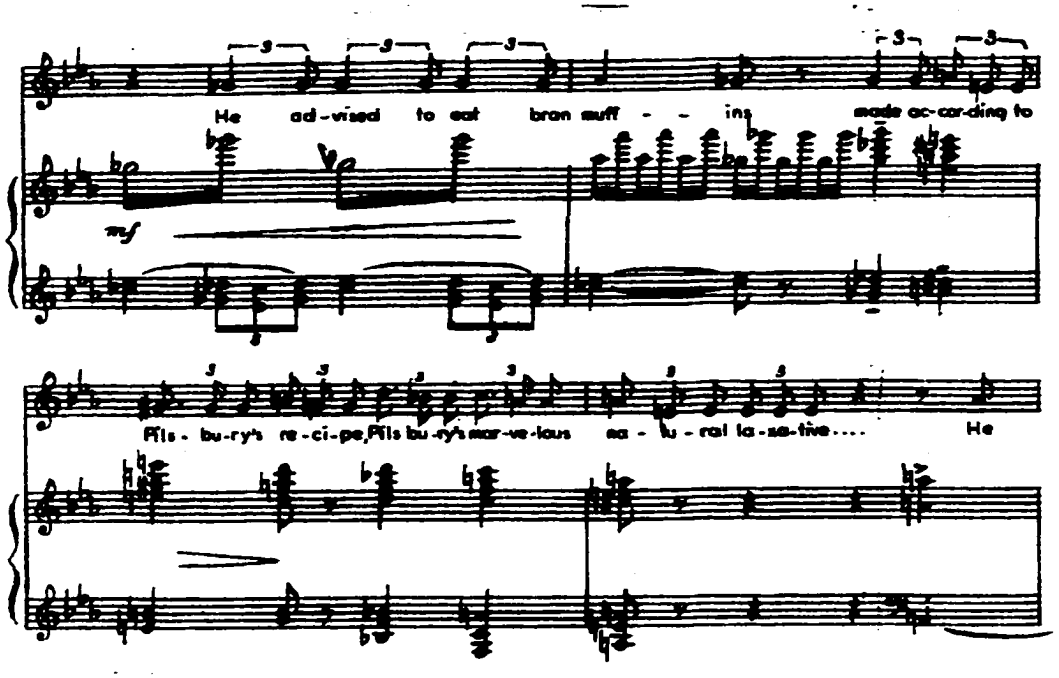

Fig. 4. Measure 12 - Measure 15 of
....And Then Her Doctor Told Her.

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SNOWY -- WHITE

So fresh and soft and snowy-white,
Utica sheets and pillow cases.

Spread them upon the bed, See how snowy-white they are.
Smooth them out and you will feel
How soft is their fabric.

They iron out smoothly, evenly, easily.
And they last so long and they cost not much.

So fresh and soft and snowy-white,
So fresh, so snowy-white.

Fig. 5 Text to *Snowy-White*.

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The purpose of this advertisement, according to Slonimsky, was to "extoll the tenderness of Utica sheets and pillowcases." Thus any interpretation should be filtered through that bias. This is the third song of a five song set. It is only 33 measures long and takes approximately a minute and half to sing. It is not particularly a funny text or a funny musical setting. Yet it has great importance to the song cycle in that it gives the listener a little relief from the comic tension of the previous pieces and allows the emotions to reset for the final two songs.

This is an amusing song and should be interpreted with perhaps a little more animation than its predecessors. It should not be taken too fast

and should be sung, following Slonimsky's instructions *con sentimento*, sentimentally; much like a love song. The diction should be crisp and overemphasized, with special care taken on the words "snowy-white." These words should be pronounced phonetically as [snO:i]-[u:a:it], with care to lengthen the 'w' of white and to eliminate the 'h'. The song should be sung straight; that is with little or no vibrato, not too loud and in a very lyrical fashion. Soft 's's abound in this song and should be sung with as much length as possible. The same holds true for the final 'sh' in the word "fresh". All 'r's should be enunciated as forward as possible and can even be flipped in the word "fabric." The word "Utica" begins with a glide and should be pronounced [Ytika]. An alternative phonetic spelling would be [I:utika], with the [I], formed by the tongue, of very short duration, and with lips already pursed for the [u] vowel.

Slonimsky's dynamic instructions should be followed exactly and in measure-18 care should be taken to follow his *animando* instruction. The phrase should be sung with high energy and no breaths allowed. Enunciation of the words should be clear without compromising the lyric connection between them. The words "smoothly, evenly, easily" should not be late, but should feel late, with a little frantic excitement. A *fermata* should be added in measure 23 over the word "long," and there should be a

clear break following it. A *ritard* can begin over the words "and they cost," and the words "not much" can be spoken for added emphasis. The final two phrases should be a steady *decrescendo* from *piano* to *pianississimo*, with the final "so snowy-white," clear with high energy, but barely audible.

This song is sufficiently a surprise in and of itself, in that it provides amusement without any broad comical tendencies. It is an excellent contrasting piece from the rest of the cycle. It has Schumannesqe qualities particularly reminiscent of Robert Schuman's *Monat*, and is possibly the most enjoyable of the five songs in this cycle to sing.

This song has a medium range, barely more than an octave, from low C to D1. However its interpretative demands, especially the dynamic range, require a flexible voice with maturity and experience. To spring it on a young student would likely be frustrating to both student and teacher. It is the type of song that requires a mastery of interpretative techniques in order to perform successfully.

NO MORE SHINY NOSE!

No more shiny nose!
No more shiny nose!

Something to keep your nose from getting shiny!
Something to rid you of this oiliness of skin.

No more shiny nose!
No more shiny nose!

VAUV is the name of our new magic powder.
Spelt V-A-U-V pronounced VUV.

VAUV is on sale in every good drug store.
VAUV keeps the shine off, and the powder on!

No More Shiny Nose!
No More Shiny Nose!

Fig. 6. Text to *No More Shiny Nose!*

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This song takes the composer back to his roots, back to his native Russia. It is in the style of a Mussorsgskyan recitative reminiscent of *Boris Gudonov*. The song is relatively short, of A:B:A form and mostly in G harmonic minor. This song is less chromatic than its predecessors, but because of the descending scale passage on the words "No more shiny nose" (with no raised sixth and seventh scale degrees), it has an harmonic minor flavor. The middle section is the good report mostly in the relative major of B flat, however this section ends in a V:i cadence.

The song should be sung in a steady slow march tempo. Each syllable in the declamatory "No more shiny nose!" section should be given extra emphasis. This section should be delivered with a dead pan

expression or with anger. The voice should be open relying on chest resonance. The final vowel resides on a G, that lies fairly low in the voice, and may need to be growled out. If the singer is able, the final vowel should be as far forward as possible and even nasalized if need be.

The surprise in this song is the *sforzando* in measure 15 on the word "VAUV". There might be some argument on the pronunciation of this word. It is spelled phonetically in the song as VUV. It is assumed by the author, that since there is an 'a' in the original word this signifies an open vowel of some sort. A compromise phonetic spelling would then be [v:a:ə:v], with more length allotted for the 'a' vowel and very little length given to the schwa.

Even though the rhythmic quality of this piece is very much emphasized, care should be taken to maintain a vocal line throughout the phrasing in the song. It is important that the rhythmic feel be maintained without losing connection. Additionally each time the word "VAUV" is sung care should be taken to make sure the 'V's are voiced for added effect, and that the *sforzandos* are all observed.

The singer should not do anything extraordinary in the interpretation of this song. He should maintain a stoic stance and demeanor throughout its delivery. The humor of this piece is in the music and the subject matter.

An authentic delivery with military seriousness will be quite entertaining for any discerning audience.

With a more limited vocal range and medium tessitura, this song could more easily be performed out of the context of the song cycle with a talented second or third year student, than those that preceded it. The E natural on top will challenge the *passaggio* of a young baritone somewhat, and the low G is a good test of chest resonance. However, in the case of measuring the difficulty of this song, interpretation is the real litmus test. Even so, a piece that is more light hearted will sometimes break barriers of risk taking down for the student. This song has the potential for doing that, and its length makes it accessible and fun.

CHILDREN CRY FOR CASTORIA!

Children cry for castoria!
Yes, they cry for Castoria....

Mother! Relieve your constipated child!

Hurry, mother....
Even a fretful, feverish, bilious child
Loves the pleasant taste of Castoria

Castoria, Castoria.
O, gentle harmless laxative
which never fails to sweeten the stomach and open the bowels!

'A teaspoonful today may prevent a sick child tomorrow. It doesn't cramp or overact. Contains no narcotics or soothing drugs. Ask your druggist for genuine Castoria which has

directions for babies and children of all ages printed on the bottle.'

Children cry for Castoria!

Fig. 7. Text to *Children cry for Castoria!*

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This song was perhaps Slonimsky's favorite of the five songs in this cycle. He sang a rendition of it in the documentary film, *Nicolas Slonimsky: The First Hundred years.* He particularly liked the falsetto use in the song. It is there really for only one purpose; humor. "My favorite advertisement was 'Children Cry for Castoria!' .....it was to be performed in *falsetto.* I pulled out all the stops to dramatize the urgent appeal, 'Mother relieve your constipated child!' When relief came, I made use of such precise expression marks as *peristaltico* and *fecalmente.*"(see Fig. 8.)

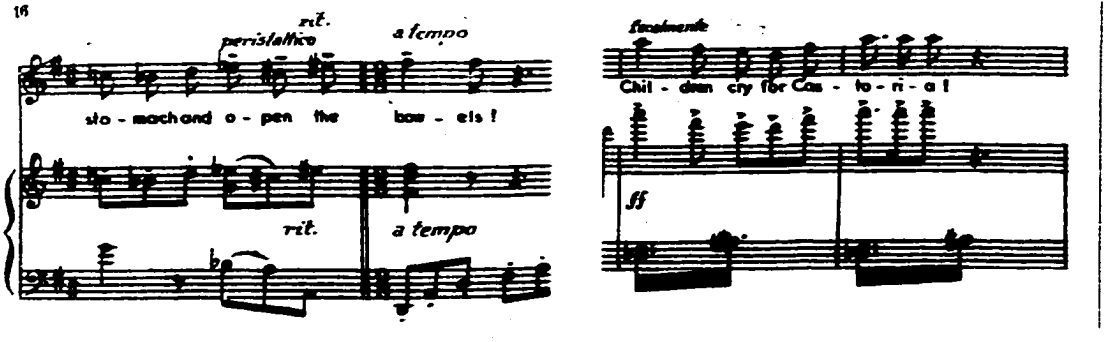

Fig. 8. Use of *Peristaltico* and *Fecalmente* in score.

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This song could be sung one of two ways. *Falsetto* all the way through; if the singer can maintain it; or *falsetto* at the very beginning and very end on the "Children cry for Castoria!" phrases, and full voice on the middle portion of the song.

Obviously Slonimsky intended for the entire song to be sung *falsetto*. However, if one gets too caught up in artistic interpretation with these songs, he will lose sight of their real value. They are to entertain, and make people laugh. Obviously if one can maintain a *falsetto* throughout the piece it would be very entertaining, especially with a deadpan serious expression. However it can be just as entertaining with *falsetto* as indicated above at the beginning and end of the piece. The text itself is humorous. And the accompaniment with its tone poem qualities, is another perfect parody of imagination and sound.

The style of this song reminds one of an early 20th century operetta aria. The opening words are preceded by a fanfare motive which is an unusual chord progression. The first and third chords (of the motive) are quarter notes (6/8 opening time signature) and spelled B flat; F sharp; D; A; the middle chord is an eight note spelled G; E flat (F sharp); B flat; F sharp. The overall harmonic effect Slonimsky created in this piece is ethereal; with

a pseudo ethnic flavor reminiscent of Sigmund Romberg and other popular operetta composers of the day.

Slonimsky's expressive direction includes the (nontraditional) *melodrammatico*. It is indeed melodramatic, very similar to recitative style, but more expressive. The rhythm must be strictly observed. A quick break for a breath is permissible before the 9/8 bar of measure 11, but not at the expense of the rhythmic integrity. All rests should be carefully observed, particularly measures 12-16. Slonimsky gives plenty of time after the words "Castoria," in measures 15 and 16 for a nice expressive look (perhaps inspired by the thought of how yummy castor oil can taste). A big breath before the word "Castoria," pick-up to measure 17 and a little catch breath after it, are needed to propel and accelerate, without breath, through the phrase "O gentle harmless laxative; which never fails to sweeten the stomach and open the bowels." A generous *ritard* should be observed at the end of the phrase on the words "open the bowels." Slonimsky has appropriately instructed this to be sung *peristaltico*.

The instructions on the bottle are just spoken clearly, but with haste. With a tinge of *fecalmente* in the voice (per Slonimsky's instructions), the final "Cry" should be sounded with an obtuse expression of serious confidence and empathy.

With its high *tessitura*, with or without *falsetto*, this song is more suitable for the maturing student. The range is from D1 to high A, which is challenging. The fact that it is to be sung, at least partly, in *falsetto* requires some skill in negotiating the register change. Although short, the song is still tiring on the voice. Even if performed entirely in *falsetto*, there is a *parlando* section, which one would assume would be spoken with appropriate chest resonance. The *falsetto* itself, plus the register changes, and the fact that it is the final song of a somewhat demanding cycle, allow this song to be appropriately challenging for the student or singer of graduate and professional level skills and experience.

These songs are fun, and they require a certain amount of risk taking, both vocally and in interpretation. They require vocal elasticity and expressive skill. Because of these challenges the songs, particularly if they are to be performed as a complete set, are most appropriate for graduate student skill level and above.

CHAPTER FOUR

GRAVESTONES AT HANCOCK, N. H.

BACKGROUND

Although quite confident in his abilities, at least in his ability to communicate, Slonimsky always seemed to regard his accomplishments with a bit of self deprecating humor. Slonimsky recalled an experience he had in Russia at the St. Petersburg Conservatory with his composition instructor, Professor Kalafati. He had composed a song to the words of his Uncle Minsky and realized that it contained a pair of consecutive fifths, which he had been taught were taboo. Slonimsky continues the story,

> But I took to heart when Kalafati told me that it was all right to use consecutive fifths in the treble over an organ point in the bass. Encouraged, I composed a prelude in which I introduced four consecutive fifths hovering high over a deep double organ point in the bass. I brought the piece to Kalafati who said the fifths were permissible under the circumstances. He complimented me on my style, so laudably Rimsky-Korsakovian, so properly Kalafatian, and showed my piece to other students as a model worth following. Eventually I published my prelude as Opus 1. My publisher said it was the most beautiful piece of music he had ever heard. Shortly afterwards he went out of business.[27]

In his writings there is at least one other recollection where a publisher "went out of business" shortly after accepting a composition of his, complimenting him on it, and publishing it. Also delivered with

[27]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch: a life story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 39.

punch-line accuracy, these stories help define the humor that is definitely a part of who Slonimsky was as a writer and as a composer of songs.

Self deprecation (without self pity) is a result of an uncanny perception of true irony, which Slonimsky could identify and exploit. His song cycle, *Gravestones At Hancock, N. H.* is an example of that ability to spot irony. Death is not pretty, but its finality and timing is certain to contain ironic twists of fate that can often be expressed, after the passage of time, in a humorous way.

Slonimsky spoke at length about his morbid "taste of humor" in an interview he gave in 1977. Replying to a question about the song cycle *Gravestones at Hancock, N. H.* he said;

> Yes. Well, you know, I have some kind of morbid taste in those matters. I'm attracted by things that are eccentric and sometimes by things that are even ghoulish and morbid in a sort of an unhealthy manner. For instance, I have made a blowup picture of the skull of Bach. (Bach's body was exhumed in 1895 and wonderful photographs were made by the professor of anatomy at the University of Leipzig. When I found out these photographs existed in the book, needless to say I immediately secured copies and had them blown up. So I have Bach's skull, which I propose to use as an illustration in my forthcoming book, *Lectionary of Music*, instead of the regular picture of Bach.) Well, this is a part of my humor, morbid humor, which is not so uncommon. As I understand Robert Benchley, the humorist, was a regular subscriber to the funeral director's magazine called *The Casket*. [laughter] *The Casket*. He was a subscriber, and I don't know what kind of satisfaction he derived from it, but he somehow enjoyed it,

> enjoyed reading about the morticians' convention at the end of the war when the question was raised about casualties possibly produced by atomic bombing, and they said that they had to be prepared for it and they had to step up production and so forth. So now this is to me--naturally, it's repellent, but (to) some humorists of that type, of the *New Yorker* type, it has some morbid attraction. Well, I don't go so far, but I am interested in things that are perhaps morbid, but at the same time, artistic. And after all, in this respect, I have a very long legacy from the Middle Ages: even the student song "Gaudeamus igitur" makes all kinds of morbid references to death, "Let's be joyful until we get buried in the earth" ("*no habebit humus*"), you know, all that sort of thing.
>
> So during the summer of 1945, I spent that summer in a small village in New Hampshire. And there was one of those wonderful old-fashioned New England cemeteries. [28]

The inscriptions on the tombstones in this cemetery, were the basis for the lyrics in the *Gravestones at Hancock, N. H.* It is not so much the subject matter that makes this cycle unusual, as it is the way Slonimsky treats the subject matter. Earlier in the interview, Slonimsky described some of his compositions, with the term "serious jesting." That terminology came up again in reference to these compositions. He described its use:

> Yes, jesting seriously. Well, after all, serious jesting also has a very ancient and honorable tradition. Hamlet made jokes about the skull of Yorick, and, of course, Shakespeare is full

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[28]Nicolas Slonimsky and Thomas Bertonneau, *Muses and lexicons oral history transcript,* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California), 298-300.

> of such serious jokes. And I think that jokes, if they are seriously meant, discover some element of truth.[29]

It is imperative that the performer of these songs understands the humor behind their inspiration. Serious jesting, morbid humor, irony, whatever the terminology it is up to the singer to understand the joke if he is to deliver the punch-line effectively, and more importantly -- tastefully. These songs should not leave an audience chortling like the *Five Advertising Songs*. They should, rather, lead to a reflective response of amusement, perhaps a giggle, a smile, or a nod of understanding. Some listeners who have not made peace with their own mortality might respond uncomfortably because of the subject matter. Some might not find them funny at all. That is not to say that these songs represent a higher form of humor. The subject matter is simple, the melody and accompaniments just interpret the inherent ironies in a whimsical fashion. The singer must deliver them to the audience in a manner that communicates the thoughtfulness of whimsy whether it's with an appropriate facial expression, an inflection of the voice, a shrug of the shoulders or nodding of the head. Whimsy, after-all is not always funny, it is often sad.

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[29]Nicolas Slonimsky and Thomas Bertonneau, *Muses and lexicons oral history transcript* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California), 301.

VAIN WORLD

Vain World, farewell to you!
Heaven is my native air.
Heaven, Heaven, Heaven is my native air.

I bid my friends adieu,
Impatient to be there,
I bid my friends adieu,
Impatient to be there,

Vain World, farewell to you
Heaven is my native air.
Heaven. Heaven. Heaven is my native air.

Fig. 9. Text to *Vain World.*

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This song is prefaced by the words, "Sacred to the memory of Mrs. Dorcas Knight, wife of Mr. Enos Knight, who died January 2, 1815 in the 60th year of her age. Slonimsky preserves the sacredness by imitating the great composer of sacred music, J.S. Bach. Although not really an imitation, more of a reminiscence, this song, nevertheless, is driven rhythmically with fugal-like question and answer phrasing. The overall form of the song is A:B:A', but it is a very short piece, only 19 full measures in length.

Slonimsky wrote the song in the key of G. Though not strictly fugal, there are two main themes that have a conversation reminiscent of a fugue.

The piece is so short, however, that there is no time to develop them harmonically or rhythmically. The themes are stated in one voice, and basically restated in the same voice. The middle section is just four measures long, and is not related to the "vain world" theme nor the "heaven is my native air" theme. Slonimsky states in his interviews that these pieces were all based on one or more scales which he published in his book *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*. If that is the case this song would have to be based on example number 1045 in his book (see Fig. 10 next page), which is that of a major scale ascending and descending.

This song contains no real surprises. It should be sung full voice with careful attention paid to the rhythm, and dynamics. The character of a "blue haired" Mrs. Dorcus Knight should be played to the hilt, and her "vanity" must be communicated to the eyes of the listeners. After all, her words, "Heaven is my native air" are presumptuous, not to mention the fact that that statement is a pun. Obviously, the humor is fairly light, but hopefully the song should instill a smile with the intent listener.

This song would be very suitable for the high baritone or soprano voice. The *tessitura* is fairly high, therefore it might be challenging for a young baritone, unless it is transposed down. However, the range of the song is easily manageable, within an octave and a half (D - high G), so most

students should have little trouble with it, especially if it is transposed to their range.

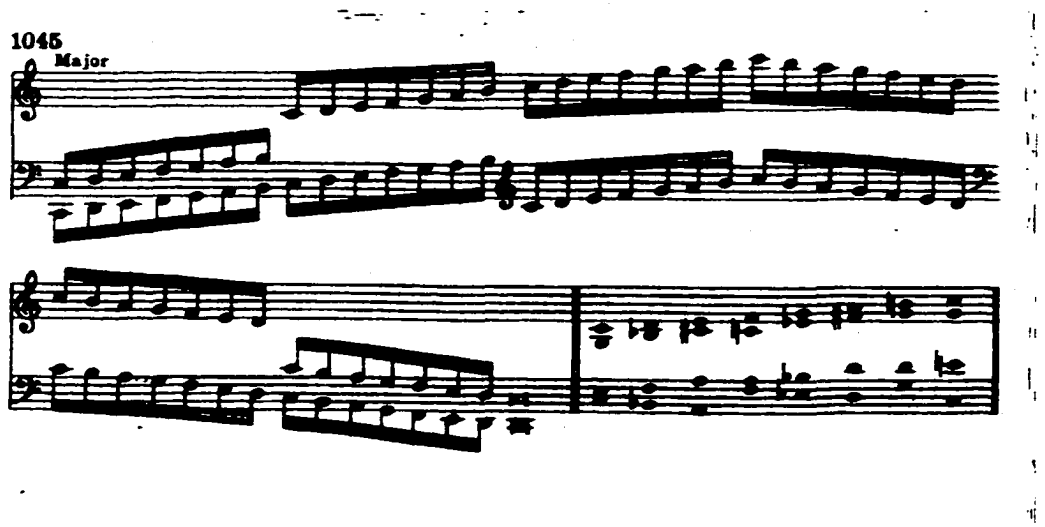

Fig. 10. C major scale, no. 1045 From *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns.* Pp. 136.

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LYDIA

Stranger, if love awakens your sighs
And Love and pity seldom sever

Pause, Pause where the much lamented lies

Where Lydia sleeps
Alas, for ever.

Fig. 11. Text to *Lydia.*

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Is there anything humorous about this poem? Obviously, not on the surface. It asserts painful emotions and images. The humor is not in the words. Slonimsky spoke of this song, "...I picked up other songs, some of them very lyrical. There was one by a bereaved husband to his wife, Lydia. It said, 'Here Lydia lies, alas forever,' and this was quite a little poetic verse. So I set that to music ["Lydia"], obviously in the Lydian mode, since it was Lydia. [laughter] I mean, this is the kind of private joke that, of course, I'm addicted to. And then I found out that this bereaved husband married another woman almost immediately after the first wife died and [he] buried her....." Obviously, Slonimsky found humor in the modality of the piece.

This song is very lyrical and sustained. It is not funny. Most musicians will be familiar with the modality upon listening, and will probably nod their approval. After all Slonimsky was not the first to employ such associations. The famous French art song composer, Gabriel Fauré also composed a song to a *Lydia,* in lydian mode. It is a musician's allusion that will be lost on many listeners.

This song is written to the "memory of Mrs. Lydia, wife of Captain David Low, who died April 11, 1829."[30] She was 31 years of age, and most

[30]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Gravestones at Hancock, N.H.; for voice and piano.* (Limit, CA: Cambria Productions, 1989), 4.

likely died of complications due to childbirth. The accompaniment is a broken chord arpeggio style. Therefore careful attention must be paid to sustain the melodic lyricism as a contrast to the accompaniment.

True to Slonimsky's memory, scale number 1047 in his *Thesaurus of Musical Scales and Patterns* is indeed lydian (see Fig. 12, below). This song is through composed. Harmonically it follows Slonimsky's scale pattern with a few accidentals thrown in for variety.

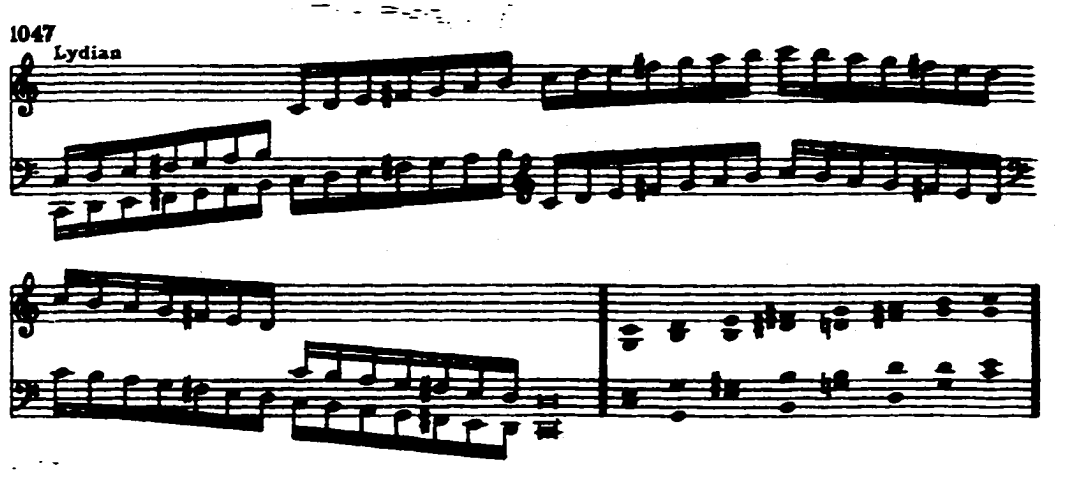

Fig. 12 C lydian scale, no. 1047 from *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns,* pp. 141.

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The song has a curious E minor flavor to it, with the C sharps that appear in both the melody and the accompaniment. By elimnating any D

sharps, Slonimsky does not satisfy the melodic minor progression one might expect, probably to preserve the modality of the piece. However the song does end strongly (melodically at least) on E, which is the dominant of the simultaneous A major and A minor final chords.

This is the type of song that singers yearn for. It is beautiful, sustained, and begs for interpretation. It will be very satisfying not only to the performer, but to the listener as well. It contrasts very nicely to the driving rhythmical styles of the song that precedes it and the one that follows. Careful attention should be paid to all of Slonimskys expression and dynamic indications with an ear for artistic balance. The performer should savor each word, voicing the S's and lengthening the vowels, and keeping the enunciation of all hard consonants as far forward as possible.

Slonimsky provides plenty of rest breaks for phrasing. One must always remember that a *decrescendo* at the end of a phrase is not a *decrescendo* in intensity or interpretation. The breath and intensity should always *crescendo* through the phrase. The performer must internalize the dynamic interpretation into an emotional response to the words and or the music. To follow blindly a composer's directions, without any motivation of emotion or thought, is to cheat the audience as well as the performer.

Very much like the song that preceded it, the *tessitura* is high in this piece. Not only is it high, but it is sustained, and more challenging, largely because of the soft dynamics Slonimsky insists on. The range is not exceptionally large, so it is conceivable that one could transpose this song into a lower key. Obviously this would make it more accessible to younger baritones. As it is written, it is most suitable for a high baritone, soprano, or possibly a young tenor.

HERE PEACEFULLY LIES THE ONCE HAPPY FATHER

Here peacefully lies the once happy father
The joy of his beloved wife and daughter

The joy, The joy,
The joy of his beloved wife, beloved wife, beloved wife
And daughter.

But whilst in health the woodsman axe,
The woodsman axe he sped,
God aimed the tree and crushed, him, dead.

Fig. 13. Text to *Here Peacefully Lies The Once Happy Father.*

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This song is perhaps the most ingenious of the six included in this cycle. Slonimsky manages to convey the message of this song in such a way one acquires the feeling that God did the father a favor. There is a busy body flavor to the accompaniment brought about by the usage of major

intervals in chromatic progressions. In the accompaniment, the consonance in chromatic progressions is too joyful. The modulations do not shock the ear, they just keep going, and they set up the irony of joy and sudden death beautifully.

The most prominent motif includes the first four notes of a major scale in ascending order. This figure appears repeatedly in the accompaniment and in the melody of the song. It is the joy motif. This motif first appears in the accompaniment at the tail end of the opening scale figure. In his *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*, Slonimsky gives examples of what he terms Plural Scales[31]. These are "progressions formed by disjunct scales," which is the harmonic basis of this song. The opening motive, which appears 14 times in a 24 measure song consists of an A major scale up to the sixth scale degree, followed by the G major progression up to the fourth scale degree, all in ascending order. He gives examples of these types of scales on page 218 of his thesaurus. These are not polytonal relationships, because they don't occur simultaneously, but concurrently. The A major, G major progression is the "consonant" harmonic "key" of this song. It appears five times in the song twice at the opening, once more in the exposition and twice at the end.

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[31]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), viii.

If performed well to a discerning audience this song will evoke some amusement, if for no other reason but that Slonimsky's accompaniment is funny. Therefore some interpretative license, with a dash of cynicism, should be taken in the performance of this piece.

In the performance of this song, one could imagine two stories unfolding simultaneously. One is the narrative that is sung, the other an imaginary ballet. Our singer is the "beloved wife" character, who possesses a most prudish appearance and personality. The imaginary ballet begins with the opening "tippee toe" motive as none other than the "beloved wife" zips from tree shadow to tree shadow (beginning down stage left), unswervingly curious about some activity taking place in the shadows (up stage right).

Ultimately the "beloved wife" catches the "once happy father" in an act of indiscretion and gasps in horror. A few days later father is chopping down a tree. Our "beloved wife" notices danger, but chooses to button her lip, and allows "the once happy father" to be crushed. Thus he fell victim to his own sin, and was forthrightly punished by God, who "aimed the tree"

and "crushed him dead."[32]

This might seem an elaborate interpretation for a song that only takes about a minute to perform. The point is, that the singer must relate a story of some sort that can be interpreted vocally as well as emotionally. If there is humor, he should be ready to exploit that as well, no matter how dry.

After all, when the punch line is, "God aimed the tree and crushed him dead," one must realize that there is a certain sophistication in the humor that requires some thought in order to pull off. The humor will be lost with too broad or too narrow an interpretation. Therefore an interpretative plan must be mapped out, and executed. With thoughtful preparation, the humor will read, and can be tastefully pulled off..

This song also sets up fairly high in the voice, again making it most suitable for a high baritone, soprano, or young tenor. As the songs that have preceded it, the range is easily manageable in that it is not large. However by this point in the cycle, without transposition, a young baritone with a medium voice would probably be getting tired and having difficulty

[32]The inscription that appeared on the tombstone from which this song was written was: David Moors, Died September 15, 1841, age 29 years. In no way does the author of this document mean to imply that he was killed of any means but accidental. The elaboration and fictional story is merely an interpretative technique to aid the singer in performance. The singer can make up any story he chooses, but he must have some sort of thought process going on, in order to present the imagery the lyrics and the music paint.

negotiating the high notes. The range of the song as written is from E natural to F.

A LOVELY ROSE

A lovely rose too fair for earth
Was blooming 'neath the summer sky,
Its beauty was of heavenly birth,
Nor should it wither, fade or die.

But he who nurtured it with care
And watched its latent charms unfold,
In kindness took the flower fair,
To plant it in a brighter world,

A lovely rose too fair for earth
Was blooming 'neath the summer sky,
Its beauty was of heavenly birth,
Nor should it wither, fade or die.

Fig. 14. Text to *A Lovely Rose*.

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This is another beautifully lyrical song. It is in fact a sad song, that evokes strong emotions. The inscription reads: "Rosa, Daughter of Jesse and Melinda Wilson, Died October 11, 1856, age 15 years, 2 mos. It is a tone poem of sorts. Rose is a metaphor for Rosa. The nurturer, is the creator, who picked her only to re-plant her where she can bloom for eternity.

This is another song that should be sung with little or no vibrato. The *tessitura* is high, so this technique also allows for some vocal relief. It should not be over sung, and particular attention should be paid to Slonimsky's interpretive markings. "Tenderly" applies not only to the accompanist, but to the singer as well.

There is nothing harmonically surprising in this song. It is basically in A flat major with a broken chord accompaniment in the right hand. The time signature is 6/8 and the formal structure is ABA. There is some mild harmonic exploration in the B section but nothing particularly extraordinary before returning to A flat at the *a tempo*.

The tempo markings should be carefully observed. In measure thirteen Slonimsky directs "A little faster." The tempo should carry a lilt at this point until the break in measure twenty, and *a tempo* in measure twenty-one.

Much as the second song in this cycle (Lydia), this song is a nice break between the driving rhythmic styles of the songs that immediately precede it and follow it. The poetry is simple, but beautiful as well, and should evoke moving memories for the audience.

The lyricism is very sustained much as in the second song. That lyricism should contrast nicely with the broken chord accompaniment in the

right hand. Slonimsky does not offer the singer much of a break, staying true to the high *tessitura*, as previously mentioned, and the medium range (E flat to F). It follows then that the appropriate choice of voices, unless of course the songs are transposed, are again high baritone, soprano or tenor.

IN MEMPHIS TENNESSEE

In Memphis Tennessee,
His body lies,
Far from his native place

Pale death
Has closed his youthful eyes
And finished his race.

Pale death.

Fig. 15. Text to *In Memphis Tennessee*

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"And there were several Civil War casualties,"[33] Slonimsky continued in his interview. "So I set them to music with a combination of 'Yankee Doodle' and 'Dixie' and so on. Each song was in the style of the period," he added. He was obviously talking about this song in particular. It begins with a military cadence droned out in middle C, that continues in various octaves (but still on C) nonstop through the entire song. It is a very

[33]Nicolas Slonimsky and Thomas Bertonneau, *Muses and lexicons oral history transcript* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California), 300.

stark, somber piece with little motives that mimic *Yankee Doodle* and *Dixie* thrown in for comic relief. One might describe them more as distant echoes of those melodies which lend an authentic Civil War atmosphere to the song. It was written to the memory of: "Edwin P., son of Benjamin and Sarah Kimball, Died at Memphis, Tennessee August 26, 1863, age 21 years, 9 months, A member of Company G 16th Regiment New Hampshire Volunteers."

It takes little more than a minute to perform this song. It should be sung in full voice, with particular attention paid to the stress marking above the word "Far" in measure eight. Also the final "death" can be sung straight, but the intensity must be maintained through a decrescendo until the sound disappears.

This song invokes a parade, similar to a death march. The singer must bring the parade scene before his audience, allow it to pass in front of them, and then allow it to disappear into silence, almost like a ghost passing through and disappearing, except here one wonders of what he heard, not what he saw.

This song, though short, will definitely evoke an image for the audience. It is probably the denouement of the song cycle. One might picture Red Skelton doing his mime of the old army veteran "reviewing the

troops" as they parade in front of him. The irony in this piece is the clash of the finality and coldness of death versus the warmth and pride of patriotism. Or the conflict between the lyrics and the music.

Standing alone, this is not a particularly challenging song. However, this song in its simplicity is rather sophisticated and requires impeccable interpretation. It could be sung out of context of the cycle, but it really is a contrasting piece that needs the contextual setting in order to fulfill its interpretative potential. The range of the song (A flat - C) is also a contrast to the ranges of the songs that preceded it.

STOP MY FRIENDS AS YOU PASS BY

Stop, my friends, as you pass by.
As you are now so once was I.
As I am now so you must be.
Prepare for death and follow me.

Fig. 16. Text to *Stop My Friends As You Pass By.*

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This might seem to be an unusual verse to include on a tombstone, but apparently this type of inscription was not unusual. Slonimsky spoke of a book that included several of the inscriptions from this particular cemetery and others in the New England area. This particular verse apparently was included in various versions:

> There is a book which comprises practically all inscriptions, particularly inscriptions in verse, which was quite a trend in the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century; then they were abandoned. I remember several of them, like, well there's one that is a classic, which is repeated in various versions ("Stop, my friends, as you go by.") I thought it would be a wonderful idea to set it to music. Naturally I set it to music using a nursery rhyme, a very morbid nursery rhyme, "Worms crawl in, worms crawl out," and so forth--Da da, da dum/ da da, da dum/ da da da da/ da da, da dum. So I used this theme, and I made it atonal and polytonal, and I composed this.....[34]

Slonimsky's setting for these words are perfect. In none of these songs is he disrespectful, nor does he treat the subject matter disdainfully. The humor, if there is any, or whatever emotion that these songs evoke are drawn from an honest perception of life and death. In this case a nursery rhyme setting is perfect, because the lyrics contain a moral: one had better prepare for death, because it is inevitable.

What is humorous about the message, is that it comes from one that has traveled to the "other side," so to speak. He then offers this welcoming message, with which most people are not going to be in a hurry to comply. The fact that he offers it in this ghoulish setting does not help encourage partakers of his invitation, either.

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[34]Nicolas Slonimsky and Thomas Bertonneau, *Muses and lexicons oral history transcript* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California), 299-300.

This song does contain one atonal progression. It is a descending scale that appears twice in the accompaniment of the final six measures of the piece. It is atonal strictly because it is built on scale degrees that appear in succession and don't repeat until the entire descending pattern is played. However the descending scale is built on a series of major and minor thirds beginning on G and ending (or beginning again on G). This progression has more of an harmonic than enharmonic flavor, but is obviously constructed enharmonically

To say that the song is atonal is not therefore an accurate representation. The fact that it contains the one atonal scale is noteworthy. The major and minor thirds contained in it make each interval sound as if the descending progressions could continue on. Also this scale is made of ten, not twelve, notes. Thus saying it is strictly dodecaphonic would not be accurate either. It does however have some similarities to scale number 1214a on page 178 of Slonimsky's Thesaurus. This page contains scales he has labeled as twelve-tone patterns and dodecaphonic. Scale number 1214a (see Fig. 16, page 77) is a scale built on a series (except for two intervals) of major and minor thirds. If one eliminates the 7th and 11th scale degrees, its pattern closely resembles the three octave G to G descending scale pattern of the accompaniment in the closing measures of this song.

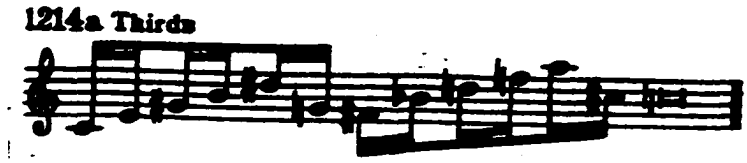

Fig. 17. 12-tone scale based on thirds, no. 1214a, from *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*.

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To say that it is polytonal in the strictest sense is probably not be accurate either. It contains very little chromaticism, and even though it does contain an atonal progression one is hard pressed to find simultaneous scale progressions of different keys being used. This is not to say that the progressions are traditional either. The entire song has a strong G tonal center. G is in fact the 'center' of the E-flat, G, B-flat intervallic relationship of major thirds that establishes the "worms go in, worms go out" motive. The fact that the accompaniment is harmonically supportive of the melody weakens the polytonal argument.

However the final 'atonal' scale progression in the accompaniment is simultaneous to a major cadential progression in the key of G in the melody. Perhaps in this sense the song is polytonal.

One thing is sure, Sloniminsky wrote this piece with a sense of humor. One has only to glance at his expression marks where he instructs the song to played and sung "With grave humor." Is the song a parody, a pun, or both? It is a parody in the sense that it makes fun of those who are living; it is a pun in the sense that it is an oxymoron, in that it makes light of death which after all is a serious subject.

This is the final song of the cycle, so the singer should present the piece intensely. He should smile at the audience and "invite" them into his "domain." The final phrase of the piece should be sung as written *subito presto* (suddenly fast) and *fortissimo* with a nice smile frozen on the singer's face as the accompaniment quickly races to the final chord. It is a great finish for an unusual song cycle, and the audience should enjoy it tremendously.

This song is so short, it really does not make sense to declare a *tessitura.* The range is medium, but the singer must be able to negotiate a high G. Other than the high note, the challenges are interpretative.

Slonimsky was not one to relish in accolades or one that pondered the triumphs of his career. His self-deprecating nature was an honest peculiarity that he personified. He did not seek compliments for his work or his accomplishments. He did however have a fondness for these songs

(*Gravestones at Hancock, N. H.*). He gave them a sort of "back door" compliment speaking more in negative terms than positive, saying things like, "I am not ashamed of those songs at all,"[35] and "I don't regard those songs as an entire waste of energy and time. They have some validity, at least to me--not anything of lasting value but, as I say, some validity." [36]

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[35]Nicolas Slonimsky and Thomas Bertonneau, *Muses and lexicons oral history transcript* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California), 300.
[36]Ibid.

CONCLUSION OF STUDY

Nicolas Slonimsky was a tremendous contributor to the musical profession on many levels, including his compositions. Although he will probably be remembered longer, studied more, and his compositions performed more in his native land of Russia, than in his adopted land of America, his influence will long be remembered world wide. If motivation and environment are an important part of a child's development, Slonimsky might have been a child prodigy or *Newtonchik.*[37] Perhaps he just took a different turn, because he was not motivated in traditional ways. *Wunderkind* or not, he was obviously a highly creative and intellectual composer, editor, writer, and researcher.

Slonimsky's compositions are indeed "collections of miniature gems" as John Cage called them. The songs included in this document are true gems of irony, creativity, and wit. In addition his many other works, including the *Thesaurus of Melodic Scales Patterns*, his collection of *50 Minitudes* for piano, among other compositions including *My Toy Balloon* and *Mobius Strip Tease*, are all tremendous creative works and are worthy of serious study themselves.

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[37]Nickname given by his parents after Sir Isaac Newton.

Slonimsky often understated his own accomplishments. It was indeed rare for him to be anything but self-deprecating when the subject turned to himself. He was not cruel in his self analysis, just blunt. The fact that he soaked up facts is an indication that he respected the truth. It was this personality trait that probably led him to pursue the performing of compositions of Ives, Varese, Cowell and others. He knew the truth about them. He knew that they were important compositions, that they had a place in music history, by helping to define eras, trends, and more than that, they were extraordinary, beautiful works. Even though this was not a popular stand, he did not shy away from it, and it probably cost him a lucrative conducting career. However, his pursuits helped to pave the way for many conductors and composers that followed, including John Cage.

He was right. Time has revealed that the works by those composers are indeed significant. Can Slonimsky, then, be called on to judge his own compositions? Since he was obviously a knowledgeable, astute musician, and apparently respected the truth, would he judge his own compositions fairly, and without bias? Not likely. However, his bias, especially late in life, would most likely be through a filter of self-deprecation.

It is interesting that he regarded his *Thesaurus of Melodic Scales and Patterns* with such fondness. He truly believed it to be his greatest work. It

is the result of an original creative and intellectual exercise. The fact that it was written more than a half century ago, and still continues to be published and sold at a respectable rate, is a clear indication that many musicians continue to think highly of it. Perhaps Slonimsky was so fond of it because it is, in a very real sense, absolute music; written in the language of music alone.

There were other compositions that Slonimsky recalled with fondness. As was his nature, he would of course, understate their importance. It is evident through his writings and interviews that Slonimsky had a respect for the song cycles studied in this document. Obviously, one can only extrapolate from the cryptic references, trying to filter out self-deprecation and other variables to conclude how Slonimsky would judge these works. That conclusion is that he had a fondness for them, and thought they had "some validity."

From his self entry in *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Eighth Edition, Slonimsky wrote of his accomplishments as a composer,

> .....As a composer he cultivated miniature forms, usually with a gimick, e.g., *Studies in Black and White* for Piano (1928) in "mutually exclusive consonant counterpoint," a song cycle, Gravestones, to texts from tombstones in an old cemetery in Hancock, New Hampshire, (1945) and Minitudes, a collection

> of 50 quaquaversal piano pieces (1971-77). His only decent orchestral work is *My Toy Balloon* (1942), a set of variations on a Brazilian song, which includes in the score 100 colored balloons to be exploded fortissssssimo at the climax..... A priority must be conceded to him for writing the earliest singing commercials to authentic texts from the *Saturday Evening Post* advertisements, among them *Make This A Day of Pepsodent, No More Shiny Nose*, and *Children Cry for Castoria* (1925).[38]

Slonimsky's good friend and composer Henry Cowell was very familiar with his compositions. In an essay about Slonimsky's works he wrote, "Behind Slonimsky's deliberate and carefully sustained shallowness, however, there are serious and valuable musical lessons." In the essay he elaborated on Slonimsky's piano composition, *Studies in Black and White*, in which he used "the ingenious technical device of having one hand play (on the piano) all white keys, the other hand all black." Because of this type of creative motivation in which Slonimsky often would "limit himself to some kind of technique where he asks, 'Is it possible?'," he regarded himself as did others, including Richard Kostelanetz, as a conceptual composer.

It is interesting to contemplate what problems Slonimsky was trying to solve when he composed the songs included in this document. He does

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[38]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Nicolas Slonimsky: the first hundred years.* Edited, with an introduction, by Richard Kostelanetz; Joseph Darby assistant editor (New York: Schirmer Books, 1994), 4.

shed some light on his concept of the song in his *Lectionary of Music*. "In a modern lexicographical sense, a song is a relatively short composition, rather spontaneously generated by an anonymous mass of people or consciously devised by a musically trained person..... The excellence of a primitive song resides in its very brevity and its limited tonal compass.... The greatest artistic substance was achieved by the German *Lied*....."[39]

In the composition of these songs, Slonimsky stayed true to the idea of brevity, and limited tonal compass. For the most part these songs are of either the form ABA or two part. Slonimsky also created some beautiful and some interesting melodies, and contemplated the use of humor, particularly in the *Advertising Songs*, about which he said, "the *Advertising Songs* are accurately and traditionally formed with the humor of inadvertence and the complete absence of purely emotional quality. That is, emotion is replaced by humor and it remains emotionally formed."[40]

If the measure of success in solving creative and self-imposed problems of composition is the ultimate creation of songs that entertain, inspire and challenge, then Slonimnsky succeeded. In his own words he measured his "principal achievement as a composer" as, "An idea

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[39]Nicolas Slonimsky, *Lectionary of Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 439.

[40]Richard Kostelanetz, "Conversation with Nicolas Slonimsky about his composing." *Music Quarterly* 74, no. 3, (1990), 470.

conceived and a logical and total development of the possibilities of that idea."[41]

These songs have real musical and vocal value, based on the fact that they are challenging, as well as entertaining on many levels. Some can be used effectively as teaching pieces, others have value in that they require risk taking, which often must be taught (or at the very least encouraged) to be performed successfully. Some students have an innate, instinctual stage presence, most others need experience practicing that craft. These pieces can inspire not only musically, and vocally, but interpretively as well.

The performance of these songs requires musical skill, vocal agility, and a sense of humor. They should not be taken lightly, for they require much rehearsal, and extensive practice, not only for the obvious vocal and musical challenges, but also for the interpretative challenges. They would be appropriate additions to any graduate or professional recital program.

To reiterate the words of Henry Cowell, "Slonimsky sophisticatedly aims to glitter--to please for the moment, to be clever, amusing. And he succeeds!" He certainly did.

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[41]Ibid., 472.

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APPENDIX

IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are many topics that would be appropriate for further research concerning Nicolas Slonimsky. Little has been written about his other compositions including: *50 Minitudes*, *My Toy Balloon*, *Mobius Strip Tease*, among others. In all Slonimsky has nearly 100 other compositions to his credit, none of which have been extensively researched. Another excellent subject would be his book, *Thesaurus of Melodic Scales and Patterns*. Slonimsky's life and accomplishments are well documented in his writings and the writings of others. However, one might conceive of a study that measured the importance of Slonimsky's contributions as conductor of the Boston Chamber Orchestra, and his work with the Pan American Society of Composers, as well as his influence on musicians, conductors, and composers in the former Soviet Union and modern day Russia.

The contributions of this remarkable man span every genre of the professional music world, and will be measured both directly and indirectly for decades and possibly centuries to come.