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Adventurous Music: Lukas Foss’ *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*

by

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ABSTRACT

Adventurous Music: Lukas Foss' *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*

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The purpose of the paper is to offer a detailed description of Lukas Foss' *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, a setting of Wallace Stevens' poem of the same title. The paper begins with an overview of Foss' achievements as a composer, conductor, educator, and pianist. The main body of the paper features a discussion of the wide variety of musical ideas contained in the work, within and among traditional parameters, with special consideration given to the non-traditional use of the instruments. This is followed by an overview of Wallace Stevens' life and works and a discussion of select elements of the poem. The relationship between the poem and the music is discussed in terms of the many levels at which Foss uses the text. The paper concludes with ways in which this work is representative of Foss' third compositional period. Appendices include a full text version of Stevens' poem and a select list of musical settings of the poem by other composers.
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The author wishes to express gratitude to Random House Incorporated for permission to reprint Wallace Stevens' poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and to Carl Fischer Incorporated for permission to reprint select musical excerpts from Lukas Foss' *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*.

Additional appreciation goes to Philip Lasser and Judith Kellock for taking the time to discuss Lukas Foss and *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. Many thanks to Lukas Foss for graciously answering my questions.

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PREFACE

My path to the discovery of *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* began with another setting of poems of Wallace Stevens: Ned Rorem’s *The Last Poems of Wallace Stevens*. I had an opportunity to study and perform these songs while a fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center. I enjoyed the opportunity very much and the songs made a lasting impression on me.

When considering a topic for my doctoral document I researched the types of dissertations that currently existed. Of the vocal topics I discovered, investigations of multiple settings of a single poet, Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman, for example, I found to be the most interesting. Remembering my work on Rorem’s settings of Wallace Stevens, I thought that perhaps a paper on settings of his poetry would be worthwhile. I soon discovered that there were far too many settings of Wallace Stevens’ poetry to be included in a single survey and began to narrow my topic. I found that one of Stevens’ poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” seemed to be set to music much more frequently than the others.

Lukas Foss’ setting was the first to which I listened and I liked it immediately. It was adventurous, funny, atmospheric, crazy, fantastic, mysterious, and surprising. I then investigated other settings by Louise Talma, Boris Blacher, and Vincent Persichetti with a comparison/contrast paper in mind. These settings were certainly worthy of my consideration but the more research I did, the more I wanted to focus on Foss’ setting exclusively. I had found that not only was this piece saturated with noteworthy features, but also that Lukas Foss himself was a compelling topic of study.
Purpose

Foss' *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* has been discussed in part in two other dissertations, one by Joseph Philip Bassin entitled, "An Overview of the Third Period Compositional Output of Lukas Foss, 1976-1983," and another by Mary Elizabeth Shea entitled, "The Middle-Period Compositions of Lukas Foss: A Study of Twenty-Three Avant-Garde Works." These papers are excellent resources for Foss' biographical information as well as detailed information on his stylistic periods, and they will be cited throughout this paper. However, based on the scope of Foss' musical language in this piece and the strength of the poem, I felt that the work warranted consideration independently. The main purpose of this paper is to describe the many levels at which this piece is so intriguing: 1) As a product of an extraordinarily successful composer; 2) an example of the use of an amazing variety of musical colors and devices; 3) a setting of a celebrated poem by one of the greatest American modern poets; 4) an example of a complex synthesis of music and text; and 5) an embodiment of the style used in Foss' later works.

Format

This paper will begin by highlighting the achievements of Lukas Foss in the many areas in which he has excelled. This will be followed by a detailed description of the musical devices used in this work. The paper will continue with an overview of Wallace Stevens' life and works and a discussion of noteworthy aspects of the poem. This will be

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followed by an examination of complex relationship between the music and the text.

Further discussion will describe how this work is a representative example of the compositional philosophies that governed Foss' later works.
INTRODUCTION

Foss' *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* is a work scored for soprano or mezzo-soprano, flute, piano, percussion, and tape recorder. It is a setting of Wallace Stevens' poem of the same title. Radio Station WFMT in Chicago commissioned the work as part of an American song festival made up of song cycles that would be composed especially for the station.¹ Foss explains, "In 1978 Radio Station WFMT in Chicago approached me with a request for a song cycle. This gave me the proper incentive to start composing the music to a poem that had been on top of my drawer for a long time."² Foss was drawn to Wallace Stevens' poem for its combination of "humor, mystery, and above all, imagery."³ Foss also feels that the poem is very visual and has said, "That which is visual is especially good to set to music."⁴

The first performance of the work was a recording session on December 3, 1978. The second performance was on a "preview concert" later that evening at the Baird Recital Hall at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The performers were Sylvia Dimiziani, soprano, Eberhard Blum, flute, Yvar Mikhashoff, piano, and Jan Williams, percussion.

The premiere performance was very well received. Thomas Putnam of the *Buffalo Courier Express* wrote:

Foss has set the poetry with often exotic melodies that let the words sing, with tonal effects that mirror the poet's sense and nonsense, and with a variety

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⁴ Interview with the author, 20 February, 2004.
of musical language that respects the multiple ways of the poet’s observations.\textsuperscript{5}

John Dwyer of the \textit{Buffalo Evening News} also praised the work:

It is genuinely a setting for poetry, and with near-conventional and near-tonal means it achieves mystery and surprise. It also has a nerve-sensitive awareness of texture. It was an admirable performance.\textsuperscript{6}

In my brief telephone conversation with Mr. Foss, I asked him about his reaction to hearing the piece for the first time. He said, “I was very pleased...very pleased.”\textsuperscript{7}

The 1981 Composers Recording of \textit{Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird} won the American Composers Alliance Recording Award. Since the work’s premiere in 1978, it has been heard on many occasions, including performances by the Bowery Ensemble in Cooper Union in 1983, and as part of the Fortieth Aldeburgh Festival in 1987, its European premiere.\textsuperscript{8} It was also a frequent addition to the many concerts in 2002, celebrating the eightieth birthday of the composer.

In April of 2003, it was performed by the author with Shannon Hesse, piano, Michael Gordon, flute, and Brian Vogel, percussion, at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University in Houston, Texas. The performance was part of an extracurricular lecture recital and featured a performance, lecture, and a repeat performance. This structure was very effective as it gave the audience the opportunity to both understand the context of the information in the lecture and to hear the piece again in a new way. The piece itself was also very effective and well received. The audience in attendance expressed many of the same types of comments found in the reviews of the premiere.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[7] Interview with author, 20 February 2004.
\end{footnotes}
CHAPTER ONE: FOSS' ACHIEVEMENTS

In addition to being an award-winning and well-respected composer, Lukas Foss has achieved great success as a conductor, pianist, and educator. He has been generous with his thoughts about his own music when asked; innumerable articles and interviews have been published in scholarly journals, newspapers, and books on modern music. He has devoted himself to building audiences and to the support of living composers. Some of the greatest composers of our time grant Foss their highest praise. What may be most impressive is the young age at which Foss achieved success and his ability to maintain that high level of achievement throughout his life.

Foss' Education

Lukas Foss was born in Berlin as Lukas Fuchs in August of 1922. In 1933, he moved with his family to Paris to escape the Nazis, and lived there until 1937. The family then moved to New York City and changed their surname to Foss.¹

Foss' musical education was excellent. It began at an early age when his mother taught him to accompany German folk songs on the accordion. Starting at the age of seven, he studied piano and theory with Julius Goldstein Herford, which he continued to do until the age of eleven. While in Paris, Foss studied piano with Lazare Lévy and composition with Noël Gallon, who were both teachers at the Conservatoire de Paris.

¹ Except where cited, all biographical information included in this chapter comes from Perone, Bio-Bibliography, 1-11.
Additionally, he studied orchestration with Felix Wolfes and flute with Louis Moyse.

Upon the arrival of the family in New York, Foss was immediately accepted into the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, studying composition with Rosario Scalero, piano with Isabelle Vengerova, orchestration with Randall Thompson, and conducting with Fritz Reiner.

Foss graduated with honors from the Curtis Institute in 1940, receiving diplomas in all four of the disciplines mentioned above. Shortly thereafter, he became one of the first registered students at the new Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood, Massachusetts. For the next three summers Foss studied conducting with Serge Koussevitzky and composition with Paul Hindemith. During this time Foss also discovered the music of Stravinsky, which he greatly admired. Foss’ rebelliousness, resulting from the discovery of this new compositional style, often got him into trouble with Hindemith, who twice threw him out of class.

Composer

As a composer Foss has gained the respect of his colleagues, won an astonishing number of awards, and contributed to the craft of composition through his innovation. He is a prolific composer; his published works number over 100 and include operas, concerti, large-scale choral works, songs, and chamber music.

Foss began composing at a young age. When Foss was eight years old, his mother told him a story about a little devil that came to earth on his birthday to cause trouble for a day. Foss proceeded to ask his mother to write a libretto based on the story so that he could compose an opera on it. When Foss was nine years old, after hearing a
performance of Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*, he apparently decided that music would be his vocation.

At the age of sixteen, while still studying at the Curtis Institute, Foss was asked by the head of G. Schirmer to submit compositions for possible publication. In 1938, Schirmer published *Four Two-Part Inventions* and *Grotesque Dance*, works Foss had written while commuting on the subway. In an article in *Modern Music*, influential New York critic Paul Rosenfeld praised Foss’ music which he had heard in what he called “…a tiny debut in the board room at Schirmer’s,” in January of 1939. According to Rosenfeld, Foss’ compositions displayed technical capacities and powers of construction that were well beyond his years. He described the work as being “rich and vigorous in contrasts,” “fresh,” and “impulsive.” Though written in 1939, Mr. Rosenfeld’s comments could have been applied to many of Foss’ later works.

In 1944, Foss was awarded the New York Music Critics’ Circle Citation for his work *The Prairie*, as “The most important new American Choral work of 1944.” At the age of twenty-three Foss was the youngest composer ever to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship. Foss composed two biblical cantatas during this fellowship including *Song of Songs* in 1946. Koussevitzky was so impressed by this work that he programmed it for eight performances in nine days with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Additionally, the Columbia recording of *Song of Songs* received the Naumburg Recording Award in 1957.

Foss is especially well-known for the innovative work in musical improvisation that he did while teaching at UCLA. In 1957, Foss founded the Improvisation Chamber Ensemble, with whom he developed new methods of notation and performance practice.

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The experiments with the ensemble were the first of their kind and received national attention. The most famous work composed during this time, *Time Cycle* (1960), won the New York Music Critics Award in 1961 and brought Foss into the foreground of contemporary music.

Foss' works have been performed by many fine performing organizations. In 1944 a suite from Foss' choral work, *The Prairie* was premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra; with this performance Foss became the youngest composer to have had a work performed by that orchestra. His *String Quartet No. 3* (1976) was commissioned and performed by the Concord String Quartet, and *Time Cycle* (1960) was premiered by The New York Philharmonic with soprano Adele Addison and Leonard Bernstein conducting. Recordings of Foss' works include performances by the Boston Modern Opera Project, The Gregg Smith Singers, and the New York Philomusica Chamber Music Ensemble. In the past few years many concerts have been dedicated to him and to his works. In March of 2003 the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra presented a week-long series of concerts in which many of Foss' works were presented and at which Foss conducted his own *Piano Concerto No. 1* (1943) and *Symphony No. 3* "*Symphony of Sorrows*" (1989-91) \(^3\)

**Conductor**

Foss' success as a conductor has been especially remarkable. He has had the opportunity to conduct the world's most celebrated orchestras. Additionally, as music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, Foss made national and international

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headlines with his programming of new works.

Foss had his first official opportunity to conduct an orchestra while studying at the Berkshire Music Center. He conducted Richard Strauss’ *Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks* with the student orchestra, though he had never conducted an orchestra up to that point. Koussevitzky, upon observing Foss on this occasion, allowed him to enroll in both the composition and conducting programs, making an exception to the center’s policy against enrolling in both. Koussevitzky soon took Foss as his protégé and assistant.

Foss’ next conducting achievements came while he was living in Los Angeles in the late 1950’s. With the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Foss presented the first marathon, six-hour concerts of works that featured works by a single composer, or works from a specific stylistic period. The concerts took place in the Hollywood Bowl, and were a huge success, especially with young people. The setting allowed members of the audience to come and go as they pleased during the especially long duration of the concert. Foss held similar concerts in New York and Israel with equal success.

In 1960 Foss, along with Aaron Copland, was selected to tour the Soviet Union with the U.S. State Department’s Cultural Exchange Program. In a series of four concerts, Foss and Copland became the first Americans to conduct the Leningrad Symphony Orchestra.

In 1963, Foss accepted the position of Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra. Under Foss’ predecessor the orchestra had been one of the more conservative orchestras in the country. Initially, Foss agreed with the members of the orchestra’s board that the concerts should include mostly standard repertoire. Foss never abandoned conducting the classics, but was clearly committed to providing a venue for
important new works by American and European composers. In his first major concert Foss featured Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and Ives’ *Unanswered Question*. Shortly thereafter, the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra became the most radical large orchestra in the world. Their concert featuring Xenakis’ *Pithoprakta* and Stockhausen’s *Momente*, in Foss’ own words, “turned the city upside down.” The concert received extensive coverage by the New York press and was broadcast nationwide.

Under Foss’ leadership the Buffalo Symphony Orchestra won three ASCAP awards for outstanding programming, the number of full-time players increased, and the level of musicianship greatly improved. In 1964, however, amidst angry complaints from audience members, declining patronage, and financial woes, the orchestra asked for Foss’ resignation.

From Buffalo Foss went back to New York City where he became the Music Director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra, a position he held from 1971 until 1990. He was well-received by the orchestra and its community. Maurice Edward, Director of the Orchestra, described Foss as “A breath of fresh air, a conductor combined with a catalyst for new music and a new approach to music….A great conductor of the classics a well as an innovator with contemporary music.”

Under Foss’ leadership the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra received four ASCAP awards for programming and performed more twentieth-century works than any other orchestra in the United States. His marathon concerts drew amazing numbers of people; a six-hour Stravinsky concert drew 12,000 people and a Beethoven concert drew over 18,000. In 1974 Foss received

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4 Shea, “Middle-Period Compositions,” 89.
5 Ibid., 92.
the Alice Ditson Award for the "conductor who has done the most for American music."

While music director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic, Foss also conducted the
Jerusalem Symphony, commuting to Jerusalem seven times per year for the four years he
held the post. In 1981, Foss again accepted a second conducting position, this time with
the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. While Foss was the director, the orchestra
improved musically and the subscription concert sales increased.

In addition to his work as the primary conductor of the above-mentioned
orchestras, Foss has guest conducted some of the world's most celebrated orchestras,
including the Boston Symphony, Chicago Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Los Angeles
Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, San Francisco

**Educator**

The year 1946 marked the beginning of Foss' career as an educator, when he was
appointed by Koussevitzky to be his assistant and a member of the teaching faculty of the
Berkshire Music Center. Foss' first major appointment as an educator came in 1953,
when he was hired to succeed Arnold Schoenberg as a member of the music faculty at the
University of California at Los Angeles. Foss was the youngest full professor ever hired
at UCLA, and taught conducting and composition there for eleven years. Since then he
has held positions as composer-in-residence at Harvard University, Carnegie Mellon
University, Yale University, Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, Manhattan School of
Music, and Boston University, where he has been a professor since 1991.\(^7\) Additionally,

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\(^7\) Watson Bosler, "Liner Notes," *I build on House*, The Gregg Smith Singers, Composer
Foss travels to give lectures and master classes. In the summer of 2000 he was a guest lecturer at the European American Musical Alliance, where part of his teaching activities included a workshop on setting the poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”

Pianist

In addition to his many other talents, Lukas Foss is a fine pianist. From a young age he appeared as a piano soloist, and by 1944 had already gained an impressive reputation for his pianistic ability. In that year Foss became the official pianist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and held the position until 1950. His international reputation was increased when he performed the premiere of his Concerto No. 2 for Piano in Venice in 1951. Foss appears as the pianist on many recordings of his works, including Sony Classical’s Time Cycle, Koch International Classics’ The Complete Vocal Chamber Works, and Koss Classics’ Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird and Chamber Selections.

Other Achievements/Recognition

Foss’ activities in support of new music and living composers have gone well beyond the featuring of new works on his orchestral programs. In 1964, while in Buffalo, Foss founded the Center for Creative and Performing Arts, which was a program for professional chamber musicians who were devoted to performing new music. This center provided an atmosphere where the composer-performer relationship could be explored in more depth.

Additionally, Foss has been extremely generous with his time and insights

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through the innumerable interviews he has given. He often shares his thoughts on the
creative process and argues for more thoughtful consideration of music in general. He
speaks from the heart and often expresses his sense of humor. In an interview with David
Thomas in 1997, Foss told a story describing a response to one of his discussions of
humor in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony:

...a teacher became angry, stood up and said, 'I don’t see any need to talk about
Beethoven in terms of a joke.' 'First of all,' I replied, 'I didn’t say it was a joke, I
said it demonstrated a sense of humor; secondly, not only did Beethoven have a
sense of humor, he also had gonorrhea.' Pretty bad! At that moment I just had to
say something naughty! The episode told me that many people have the wrong
impression about "humor." They think it is the opposite of seriousness.

Among the celebrated composers of our time have who have given Foss their
highest praise are Virgil Thompson, Aaron Copland, and Leonard Bernstein. After
hearing The Prairie in 1944, Thompson wrote of Foss, "He cannot fail to raise the
musical standard of his generation." In 1960 Copland wrote of Foss, "It is impossible
not to admire the spontaneity and naturalness of his musical flow, the absolute clarity in
texture, and the clean and easy handling of large formal problems. That Foss is a born
composer is obvious." In 1960, at the premier of Time Cycle, conductor Leonard
Bernstein told the audience in attendance, "My colleagues on the stage and I think so
highly of Lukas Foss' Time Cycle that we would like to make you a proposal: If you
wish, we will repeat the whole piece for you...And if there are only twelve people in this
house who want to hear it again we will play it for those twelve.” That evening featured
the first ever repetition of a piece by the New York Philharmonic at the occasion of its

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11 Aaron Copland, Copland on Music, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1960), 71
premiere.  

Lukas Foss’ achievements place him among the most accomplished composers of the twentieth century. The achievements within each category mentioned above would be noteworthy independently; the combined successes in sheer number, quality and consistency make Foss a truly extraordinary man. The joy, sense of adventure, and generosity of spirit with which Foss approaches composition come out in both interviews and the works themselves. Foss’ life and music are equally colorful.

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CHAPTER TWO: INSTRUMENTATION

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Foss’ *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* is a setting of a poem of Wallace Stevens of the same title. The music with which Foss sets this text is a combination of a great variety of musical devices and ideas. Especially noteworthy is Foss’ use of extended techniques to expand the timbres available from the instruments.

The instrumentation in Foss’ *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* is the most immediately striking musical element of the work. It contains an incredibly wide variety of sounds created by the expanded timbral sonorities of the voice and instruments. It is important to note that these expanded sonorities were not invented by Foss nor are they particularly avant-garde independently. What is interesting is the variety within and among the special sonorities and their juxtaposition with other musical parameters. Also interesting is the manner in which Foss communicates his intentions to the performers. Because there is no standard notation for many of the sounds, Foss provides explicit written and pictorial notation to clarify his intention and to assist the performer in achieving the intended effect.

The percussion part of this piece contains an interesting complement of unusual “instruments.” In addition to tape-covered triangle beaters, the percussionist uses two cowbells (small and large), two Japanese style bowls (large and small), a superball mallet, felt mallet and chime mallet, a flexatone, and a Jew’’s-harp.¹

¹ Foss does not indicate the material of the Japanese bowls, but in order to achieve an audible sound, metal bowls are typically used.
Virtually everything the percussionist does is inside the piano. The percussionist performs a variety of activities including the placing and rumbling of the bowls and cowbells, scraping the cowbells across the strings, dropping or throwing the bowls, striking the inside of the piano with mallets, and playing on the strings with the tape covered triangle beaters. Outside the piano, the percussionist is asked to play the Jew’s harp and the flexatone. In addition, the percussionist is asked to serve as sound engineer during the last section, turning the tape recorders on and off at the appropriate moments.

The use of the bowls and cowbells affords Foss the tools for an amazing variety of sounds. The sound is not only affected by the size and shape of these “instruments,” but also by the means in which they are applied to the piano strings. Foss asks for the percussionist to either drop, throw, or place these items in the piano from a variety of different heights and over different pitch areas of the strings.

Foss often clarifies his intentions with detailed written and pictorial instructions for the percussionist. For example, at the first entrance of the percussionist Foss gives the instructions, “Noiselessly set a bowl (large curved bottom) over the strings,” and “Strike a metal brace inside the piano (chime mallet). Immediately give a gentle push to the bowl so it will rumble back and forth.” Foss also provides a graphic example of the bowl rumbling back and forth.²

Example: Foss’ pictorial and written instructions, section I, page 3.

At the beginning of section II, Foss asks the percussionist to drop both large and small bowls into the piano from a height of three inches. Foss provides examples of pictorial notation to give an idea of the resulting sound along with an explanation in the bottom margin of the score.

Example: Bowl dropping notation, section II, page 4.

Another example of unusual pictorial notation occurs in section IX, when Foss asks the percussionist to play the flexatone. Foss uses pictorial notation to describe a sample of the resulting sound that he wants.

Example: Flexatone notation, section IX, page 11.

In section X, an improvised duet occurs between the percussion (using triangle beaters inside the piano) and the flute. Here Foss provides many instructions to the players on what part of the improvisation is up to them and what is composer-controlled.
Flute/Percussion Duet (30")
Use all twelve notes, all registers. Mix these: 
Use p/mf/f. Pauses 1/2 to 1/2. Sometimes omit * (no pause)

Example: Improvisation duet, section X, page 12.

As seen in the above example, Foss also gives specific instructions for the choice of dynamics and use of pauses. On the musical score, Foss does not indicate exact pitches for the percussionist because he or she hits the strings inside the piano at random, placing instead the above patterns of stems on a clef-less staff.

One last example of specific written notation for the percussionist occurs in the thirteenth section of the piece. Instructions for the tape delay are both provided at length in the bottom margin as well as notated in the score, with the words (on) and (off). The percussionist is instructed to place two tape recorders next to each other; recording on one and playing back seconds later on the other, creating slightly softer echoes. Foss instructs the percussionist to keep turning the volume to N (niente) at the prescribed moments and then to go back to the proper volume.³

Foss’ treatment of the piano is probably the most unusual; the pianist plays very

³ The instructions for this procedure are slightly confusing. The desired effect is to have an echo of the live sound produced by the soprano. Foss also allows for this idea to be executed through the use of another singer backstage. Sound equipment has also developed quite significantly since 1978, so modern performances of this work would probably include a delay created with a console from the sound booth. In the author’s performance, pre-recorded tracks were used; the percussionist simply pushed the “play” button at the appropriate times.
little music using traditional techniques. Instead, Foss treats the piano as more of a percussion instrument. Most of the pianist’s activities include inaudible depression of keys that affect the sounds of the gestures played inside the piano. The pianist, like the percussionist, is also required to strum and pluck the strings inside the piano as well as to drop bowls inside it. Within these activities Foss further varies the sound by asking the pianist to strum or pluck the strings with either the nail or the flesh of the thumb, or both, as well as by the use of either the damper or sostenuto pedals.

Foss is very explicit in his instructions for the pianist. Included in the inner cover of the score are instructions for how to interpret the notation for the silent depression of the keys and for the strumming inside the piano. Foss indicates that the lid of the piano should be off and that the pianist should face the audience. Additionally, Foss includes instructions on how to interpret his pedal markings as well as instructions on what to do if the metal brace of the piano is the way of strumming the indicated pitches.

Foss also supplies specific written instructions within the score to clarify his intentions. Throughout the work, for example, if Foss wants the pianist to differentiate between the use of fingernails or flesh, he simple writes the indications, “use nails” or “use flesh” in parentheses next to the notated gesture. On a number of occasions Foss makes the indication “keyboard” to ensure that the pianist knows not to play inside the piano at that point. In section XI the pianist is asked to strum inside the piano with the nails and hand on the strings “a la banjo.” At the beginning of section IX, where the pianist is asked to drop bowls in the piano, Foss provides both written and pictorial instructions.
Example: *Notation for dropping bowls, section IX, pages 10-11.*

At the beginning of section XII the pianist is asked to "throw in small bowl and small cowbell over middle register strings/keep cowbells + bowls rumbling pp." Foss marks a single line, approximating a staff, with two note heads and sforzando forte-markings to represent the throwing of the bowls.

Example: *Bowl throwing notation, section XII, page 14.*

Foss also makes adjustments in timbre in section XII with changes in pedal. In the top margin of the score, Foss explains, "The rumble of the bowls + bells continues, though reduced in strength by the shift from RP to MP." As explained by Foss in the inside cover, RP stands for right pedal (damper) and MP for middle pedal (sostenuto).

The musical material in the flute part contains many extended techniques. The flutist is often asked to play very quick flourishing gestures and to play pitches at the
highest extreme of the player's ability. Additionally, the flutist is asked to perform harmonics, multiphonics (both through fingering and singing), flutter tonguing, and key clicks. In more than one instance the flutist is asked to simply blow air through the flute without creating pitch. As part of a visual effect, Foss also asks that the flutist be in the distance or out of the vision of the audience.

The first example of interesting timbre variations for the flute comes at the end of the first section. The flutist is asked to create the harmonic B above the treble staff through the fingering of three different fundamental pitches on the staff below it. The notated fundamental pitches are not actually heard; they serve only to vary the timbre of the resulting harmonic. Foss makes an indication in the score that the pitches given are only a sample; what is important is that the quality of the resulting harmonic is different, not the order of the variation. Additionally, next to the notated fundamentals Foss includes the text, "the moving eye of the blackbird." Because these pitches are not actually heard, the text may serve as an indication of a dramatic motivation for the flutist or as a hint of how Foss plans to unify the work. The flutist further varies the timbre on the repeated F (top line of treble staff) by the alternated use of the trill key.

Example: Extended timbres in flute, section 1, page 4.

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4 The use of these pitches as a unifying element will be discussed in Chapter Four.
Foss often asks for groups of notes that he calls “grace notes” that are to be played, “as fast as possible.” An example of this notation is found in the gestures played by the flutist in section III. In this example the exact pitches are not notated, but the contour of the gesture is given with the shape of the stems that Foss places on the treble staff, as well as with the letters “L” and “H” for the low and high points.

![Example: Grace note notation in the flute, section III, page 5.](image)

In the sections where Foss wants the flutist to play the key clicks, he notates the pitches on the staff with x’s and gives written instruction underneath.

![Example: Key click notation, section V, page 7.](image)

One of the most striking examples of an extended technique in the flute occurs just before section VI. While the percussionist scrapes the cowbell across the strings of the piano, the flutist is asked to play multiphonics. Foss provides a specific fingering for
the flute in an attempt to assist in the execution of it.

**Example:** *Multiphonics/flute fingering, section VI, page 7.*

The musical material found in the voice is also saturated with unusual devices, including shouting, whispering, Sprechstimme, and straight-tone. Additionally, the disjunct contour of the vocal lines and the extreme ranges covered in a short amount of time could be considered as nonvocal.\(^5\)

As he does for the other performers, Foss supplies written instructions for the extended techniques in the voice part. In the page of instructions inside the cover of the score, Foss indicates that when the singer sees the “whisper” instruction in the score, it is to be executed with some speech tone. Foss also explains the “N” marking as equaling “niente” or inaudible.

Within the score, most of the written instructions are very simple compared to those used in the instrumental parts. Short, one-word instructions such as “shout” and “whisper” do not require much clarification. One unusual instruction is “quasi

‘Sprechstimme,” which Foss uses in combination with notated pitches on the staff.

\[ \text{(quasi "sprechstimme")} \]

\[ \text{The mood traced in the shadow} \]

**Example: Sprechstimme indication, section VI, page 8.**

In section III, Foss asks the singer to sing glissandi, the outer pitches of which are indeterminate. Foss notates this by placing stems on the staff at approximate pitch levels but uses no note heads. There are two such gestures in this section. Foss indicates that the second one should be sung higher by using the same notation on the staff but adding the word “higher.”

In section XI, the singer is asked first to shout and then to sing lines of text. In this section, Foss does not specify what pitch the singer should use for the shouted segments. As in section III, he places stems on the treble staff to indicate rhythm and gives the singer a written instruction to “shout.”

\[ \text{f shouted} \]

\[ \text{He rode over Connecticut, Connecticut,} \]

**Example: Shouting indication, section XI, page 13.**
An interesting result of Foss’ use of extended techniques is that many of them result in timbres that sound electronically produced. Foss himself describes the sounds as, “Often weirdly reminiscent of electronic sounds,” and explains, “Some listeners find it hard to believe, but there are no electronics in the piece except for an optional echo of the live voice in the thirteenth way of looking at a blackbird.” Especially deceiving are the sounds created by the use of the bowls and cowbells inside the piano and the flexatone. Another variation on these types of sounds occurs in section XIII. During the echo of the voice the flutist blows air through the flute without sounding any pitches. On the audio recording of this author’s performance, the sound heard could be described as reminiscent of a scratchy phonograph or old-fashioned radio program.

_Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird_ may be considered a virtuosic piece, with difficulty lying both in the execution of extended techniques, and in the coordination of them. Foss often requires the pianist to go from playing the keyboard to dropping bowls, to playing silently depressed keys, to strumming all in a very short amount of time. Many of these activities are executed while simultaneously holding down a pedal.

Difficulty in the flute part comes largely from the execution of the special techniques. Even with Foss’ clarification for fingering, multiphonics and harmonics can be unstable sounds and difficult to produce consistently. Also difficult are the quick grace-note patterns as well as the sections where extremely high pitches are repeated for a long time.

Difficulty in the voice part stems mostly from the execution of the disjunct vocal lines as well as the text underlay on higher pitches. In a few instances the singer is asked

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to sing closed syllables (those that end with a consonant) on a note that is higher than may be comfortable; words such as “black” or “winds” are placed on pitches above the treble staff. Additionally, the singer must sometimes enter on a pitch that is not readily audible beforehand. In the flute/percussion duet in section X, for example, the flutist has to somehow give a pitch cue to the singer while improvising. While it certainly can be done, it takes some maneuvering. Additionally, the intervallic content of the vocal lines often does not correspond with traditional melodic material, which means that the singer must have a strong sense of pitch. One other consideration is the shouting in section XI. It can be very difficult to sing after shouting for such an extended period of time.

Foss’ use of such a wide variety of extended techniques makes the instrumentation the most immediately striking element of the piece. The combination of these techniques in combination with traditional material creates music that is especially colorful and full of character.
CHAPTER THREE: MUSICAL DEVICES

Foss adds to the variety of sounds created by expanded instrumental timbres with the use of differing melodic and harmonic languages and styles. The absence or varied use of meter, textures that range from stark to dense, and creative uses of articulation and dynamics contribute to the variety. Through the combination of these devices with the timbral sonorities discussed in Chapter Two, Foss provides himself with an intensely rich palette with which to set the text.

Melody

The melodic material in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* features a wide variety of contours. Much of the melodic material is incredibly disjunct, featuring large leaps in alternating directions, both within and between segments. Other melodic lines may move in a series of small intervals, either in a strictly ascending or descending direction. Also included are narrow contours featuring steps and repeated notes as well as those that are more lyric in nature. A large percentage of the melodic segments span extremely large ranges and features the extended use of major sevenths, major ninths, and tritones.

One of the best examples of a melodic line that embodies a number of the above mentioned features is the first statement by the voice. The line features alternating ascending and descending tritones, the leap of a major seventh, and spans an octave plus a fourth within eight beats.
Example: Contour, section I, page 3.

The melodic material at the beginning of section II is an example of disjunct contour both within and among melodic segments. Here Foss repeats a segment of text, "I was of three minds," set to three melodic segments that are all a different order of the four pitches: B, D-sharp, F-sharp, and E. The first statement is the most disjunct and features a leap of a major ninth. The next entrance is a major seventh above the last note of the first segment and the entrance of the third segment dips down a perfect fifth to B before returning back up to the F-sharp.

Example: Contour, section II, page 4.

Melodic material given to the flute can also be extremely disjunct and span large ranges. The solo material at the end of the second section features enormous leaps in
alternating directions. The entire section spans the range of two octaves plus a sixth and features the tritone, major seventh, and major ninth intervals.

Example: Contour in the flute, section II, page 4.

The vocal material on the text in section IX, "When the blackbird flew out of sight," is another example of a disjunct contour and the use of major sevenths and major ninths. On the first fragment of text, "When the blackbird," the voice enters on an F-sharp (top line of treble staff) and immediately leaps down a major seventh. This is followed by the quick alternation of ascending and descending fourths. The entrance of the voice one beat later on the text, "flew out of sight," is on an A-flat above the treble staff. The voice leaps down a major ninth before the quick alternation of ascending and descending fifths.

Example: Contour, section IX, page 11.
Foss also uses melodic segments that are a series of small intervals that move in strictly ascending or descending order. The first example of this is in the voice part on the text, "The only moving thing." This segment features a series of different qualities of thirds (outlining an augmented eleventh chord) and spans the range of an octave plus a tritone.

Example: Ascending series, section 1, page 3.

An example of a series of descending intervals may be found in the vocal line at the end of section VI on the text, "An indecipherable cause." This line, beginning with the second note, which is G-flat on top of the treble staff, descends by tritone, minor thirds, and a perfect fourth until it reaches the A below the treble staff. The line spans the range of an octave plus a major sixth and outlines a fully-diminished seventh chord.

Example: Descending line, section VI, page 9.
In addition to the above-mentioned examples, Foss uses series of ascending intervals in the grace note gestures in the flute. A clear example of this is at the beginning of section V. Here the series is repeated and augmented with each repetition, so that the highest notes rise from E, to G-sharp, to C.


Other melodic material is much more compact, featuring intervals of major or minor seconds. This material is used more sparingly and for shorter melodic segments but is noteworthy for its contrast to the wide range of surrounding material. In section IV, for example, the upper range of each of the two main melodic segments hovers around the pitch D on the fourth line of the treble staff.

Example: Major/minor seconds, section IV, page 6.

Foss also includes lines that are much more lyrical in nature. A striking example of this is in section V. The melodic material in this section features leaps of thirds,
fourths, and fifths, many of which imply traditional triadic harmony. Large leaps in one direction are usually followed by a smaller leap in the opposite direction.

\[ \text{Music notation} \]

*Example: Lyric contour, section V, page 7.*

This type of material is also found in section XIII. The melodic line on the text, "It was evening all afternoon" begins on B-flat below the treble staff and ascends through the intervals of a major second, perfect fifth, and minor third, followed by a stepwise descent to E-flat on the bottom line of the treble staff.

\[ \text{Music notation} \]

*Example: Lyric melody, section XIII, page 15.*

**Rhythm**

The overall rhythmic character of Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird is free and unbound. With the exception of a few brief gestures, there is no specific meter used throughout the piece. Foss varies the tempo through the use of differing lengths of
silence and the extensive use of traditional markings such as accelerando and ritardando. Additionally, because of the lack of definite meter, the vertical synchronization of the individual parts is often indefinite. As with the notation of some of the timbral special effects, Foss uses auxiliary types of notation to clarify his intentions.

Temporal relationships between groups of notes within smaller sections are notated with a traditional complement of durations ranging from whole notes to sixteenth notes and including eighth-note and quarter-note triplets. Within these smaller sections Foss uses bar lines to organize gestures, with most of the “measures” containing varying number of units. In places where the specific duration of a given pitch is not especially important, Foss uses a stem-less note head.

Quite often the length of a given gesture is governed by the use of a fermata over which Foss indicates a number of seconds. In this example Foss also gives written rhythmic instructions indicating that the flutist is to synchronize the tempo and rhythm of the repeated figure with that of the rumbling of the bowl inside the piano.

\[ \text{Example: } \text{Use of fermata, section IV, page 6.} \]

Foss also indicates duration through written explanation. At the end of section VIII, for example, Foss tells the flutist to repeat a triplet gesture “as often as possible
without taking a new breath." At the beginning of section VII, Foss places whole notes on the staff to indicate pitch but provides written instructions asking the flutist to make the notes three to six seconds long and to vary the pauses between them from zero to four seconds. Foss also uses simple indications such as "stop" and "continue."

The absence of meter means that the vertical synchronization must often be approximated by the performers. In section VIII, for example, the voice and the piano are synchronized on their entrance at the beginning of the section. Subsequent entrances, however, are not governed by any strict notation, contributing to the free and gestural character of the section.

Example: Approximate synchronization, section VIII, page 10.

In other cases Foss supplies a dotted line to indicate where the performers should be together. In the final section Foss coordinates the turning on and off of the tape
recorders with specific syllables in the voice.

Example: Dotted line notation, section XIII, page 15.

Foss varies the tempo within and among the major sections of the work. Most of the major sections are characterized by the use of a metronome marking, but this is quite often distorted by the use of unusual and unpredictable durations of silence, simple markings such as “free” and “fast,” as well as the use of traditional devices such as ritardando and accelerando. In most cases, the tempo indicated by the metronome marking does not last long enough to establish any recognizable context for a tempo perse.

An example of a section that features an uneven tempo is the opening section. The first gesture in the flute, piano, and percussion is marked “presto.” This gesture is a quick flourish followed by a fermata which immediately stops the momentum. When the voice enters, Foss indicates that the tempo should be a strict “quarter note equals sixty.” After only eight beats there is a silence of five seconds, notated with a whole rest on the staff with the written indication “5"” above it. The next entrance of the voice is to be “free-mysterious” and is followed by a four-second silence notated in the same manner as before. This is followed by one “measure” that is notated with eighth notes on the staff.
and the words “Fast” and “Accel.” The tempo marking, “quarter note equals sixty” returns for the last statement of text. The section is continued with solo music in the flute that contains only stem-less note heads as well as unpredictable moments of silence.

This use of irregular or uneven tempo continues throughout the work. Section III, for example, begins on a fermata in the flute and there is no indication of tempo. Quick whirling gestures are separated by silences of four seconds and then three seconds. This free tempo lasts through the statement of the text, “In the autumn winds.” After this, Foss again provides metronome markings which are in preparation for musical material that is completely different rhythmically than anything heard up to that point. This segment features a metrical pattern that alternates duple and triple pulses. It is interesting that the odd number of eighth notes in another context would be an example of how a composer distorts a given meter, but in this case, it functions as the steadiest rhythm in the first half of the work.

Example: Use of meter, section III, page 5.

A similar type of meter occurs in section XI. In this section Foss alternates groups of two and three eighth notes. Unlike the material in section III, this pattern governs the whole of section XI.
Example: *Use of meter, section XI, page 13*

In some sections of the piece there is truly no sense of pulse. In section XI, for example, the first twenty seconds (notated with 20" above the staff) feature a constant repetition of extremely high notes in the flute while the pianist drops bowls into the piano. The percussionist enters with the flexatone after a few seconds to add to the texture. At this point there is absolutely no discernible sense of meter or tempo. Foss simply asks the player to make these sounds for the given number of seconds.

Section X is an example of the combination of both free and controlled rhythmic patterns. This section features the improvised duet between the flute and percussion that was discussed in terms of timbral variation in the percussion Chapter Two. Here Foss provides the performers with sample rhythms that they may alternate as they wish. The improvised duet continues for thirty seconds before the entrance of the piano and voice. Each statement of the piano and voice is in a measure with four beats in an indicated tempo.
Example: *Juxtaposition of rhythmic ideas, section X, page 12.*

Harmony

Foss uses a great variety of harmonic devices including triadic harmonies and vertical sonorities built on dissonant intervals, especially the tritone, major seventh, and major ninth. Also included are sections or segments of material where identifiable harmony is virtually absent. Foss often combines these ideas within sections or segments and also distorts triadic harmony with added notes. Harmony is also sometimes implied by the melodic material and reinforced with repetition and register.

The opening section is a good example of the use of many of the above-mentioned devices. The opening "niente" chord is a C-major chord in the piano in root position combined with a B-F tritone a third above the G of the chord.
Example: Opening "niente" chord, section I, page 3.

These pitches are activated when the pianist strums inside the piano from middle C to the F on top of the treble staff. Because the sostenuto pedal is depressed, only the pitches of the chord and tritone will keep ringing. However, these pitches are somewhat hidden by a loud and fast gesture in the flute. After an indeterminate silence in which the pitch of the strummed strings still rings slightly, the entrance of the voice emphasizes this harmony through its repetition of the B-F tritone as well as the use of the G and C of the triad. Middle C is the lowest and last note heard.

Example: Reinforced harmony in voice line, section I, page 3.

There is another silence while the pianist depresses again the C triad and B-F tritone. The next entrance of the voice features the same B-F tritone as well as the G and the C. Underneath, the piano strums ninths and sevenths, the outer notes of which are C
and F in the same register as the original niente chord. This is followed by another silence. The next melodic segment is in the voice and starts on C and shoots up by thirds to an F-sharp, which without octave displacement would be a tritone above the middle C. The final statement in the voice emphasizes the F-B tritone again with a brief departure to an F-sharp that sounds like a “wrong note.” The section continues with the flute repeating first the B and then the F of the B-F tritone while making timbral variations. The section ends with the alternation of the F-B tritone in the flute.

There are also moments in this piece where harmony is virtually absent. In section VII, for example, the flute is asked to bend a series of pitches to varying degrees. In the introduction to section II, the only sound heard is the dropping of the bowls into the piano and the resulting buzz. In the introduction to section XII, the sound is even more ambiguous in that more than one item is thrown into the piano at the same time. The harmony is distorted further by the bended pitches of the Jew’s harp.

Section IX is a good example of a combination of ambiguous and quantifiable harmonic material. The section opens with a combination of bowls being dropped into the piano, the quick repetition of the highest note the flutist can play, and the flexatone. The pianist stops dropping bowls to inaudibly depress a “niente” chord that contains an inverted C major triad as well as an F# to create a C-F-sharp tritone.
Example: Combined ambiguous and quantifiable harmonic material, section XI, page 11.

The following material in the voice features two melodic segments that span a major seventh and a major ninth. These intervals also outline the strummed material in the piano. Though the vertical sonority no longer contains the bowl dropping, the flexatone and the repeated note in the flute continue.

The improvised duet in section X is another example of a combination of ambiguous and quantifiable harmony. As described previously, the flutist and percussionist are given sample rhythms and sample contours. The resulting harmony is obviously not quantifiable. When the voice and piano enter, the vertical sonorities result from statements of the same melodic material in contrary motion. While the resulting harmonies from the combination of the voice and piano are dissonant, they are still recognizable and contrast the indeterminate nature of the material in the flute and the percussion.

Foss also implies harmony through the use of melodic segments. In section II, for
example, the notes used in the voice are B, D-sharp, F-sharp, and E. This gives the implication of a dominant chord moving to a tonic chord. The order of the pitches as well as the register and repetition reinforce this relationship.


Both sections III and XI feature examples of triadic harmony with an added pitch. At the end of section III, the right hand of the piano repeats an F-sharp major chord with an added B while the percussionist repeats the same B using triangle beaters inside the piano. An additional harmonic relationship is implied in that the F-sharp major chord functions as the dominant in B. In section XI, a similar relationship occurs between the use of the E-flat-seventh chord with an added A-flat in the piano.

Example: Triadic harmonies with added notes, section III, page 5.
Example: Triadic harmonies with added notes, section XII, page 14.

One last example of a different type of harmony used is in section XII; it is a harmony that is particularly dissonant. The sonorities strummed in the piano throughout the section contain pitches that are one half-step away from the pitches in the voice line and are in the same register. Adding to the dissonant quality is the melodic emphasis of the major seventh and the tritone.

Articulation and Dynamics

While Foss’ use of articulation and dynamics do not require much explanation they do bear mentioning for their effect on the work as a whole. Foss uses a wide variety of articulation markings including staccato and tenuto markings as well as glissandi and accents. Curiously, he uses almost no slurs or phrase markings. Dynamics used range from fortissimo to pianissimo. Foss is very meticulous in his use of these devices throughout the work, with single gestures often featuring multiple and contrasting articulation and/or dynamic markings.

Texture

As one might expect, the textures in this work are also varied. They range from
sheer solo lines to thick and complex combinations. The relationships between the instruments also vary and include simple voice and accompaniment, voice and piano with instrumental obbligato, duets, and juxtapositions of independent lines.

Foss uses solo lines on a number of occasions, most often in the flute or the voice. While many of the vocal lines are technically accompanied by strummed chords inside the piano, the decay of these chords is almost imperceptible, resulting in a solo type texture. This type of texture occurs twice in the opening section, once on the opening text, “Among twenty snowy mountains,” and again on the text, “the only moving…” In section VII, Foss uses solo texture for the text, “Do you not see how the blackbird” and in section VIII on the text, “But I know, too.” In section VI, Foss combines solo texture with special effect devices for the text, “The mood traced in the shadow.”

Solo material in the flute is also common. Statements of solo material in the flute occur at the end of section I where the flute makes timbral adjustments on the B-F tritone as well as at the end of section II, where it reinforces the C-F-sharp tritone. Particularly distinct is the solo material in the flute at the beginning of section V that features continually augmented ranges and a reinforcement of the tritone. Additionally, the flute is given solo material at the beginning of section VII on bent pitches and at the very end of the piece where he/she blows air through the flute while fingerering the F-B tritone.

Other sections or segments feature the combination of two instruments. The material at the end the end of section III features the first occurrence of a texture where two instruments are synchronized in the presentation of related material. Another example of this effect is the improvised flute and percussion duet in section X.

The beginning of section IX is a good example of a more dense texture, with the
combination of the flute, flexatone, and piano. The fullest textures, however, occur in the next two sections. In section X, after the flute and percussion duet, the voice and piano enter to make a full, four-part texture. In section XI, the pianist plays a full two-handed texture while the flute, voice, and percussion all perform equally significant musical material.


Finally, textures also vary in the way the instruments relate to each other. Many of the sections feature a “voice plus accompaniment texture.” This is most obvious in section V where the voice and piano present diatonically related material that is melodically and rhythmically lyric. This section sounds the most like a “song” of any of the other sections.

Other sections feature the augmentation of this texture with the addition of the flute or percussion in an obligato-type role. In sections IV and VIII, for example, the piano strums vertical sonorities under the voice, which is then echoed in the flute with the
interval previously sung in the voice. In section VII the percussion serves as the
obbligato instrument by pulling the superball mallet across the sounding board inside the
piano, while the piano accompanies the voice with synchronized strumming also inside
the piano.

Example: Voice/piano/obbligato texture, section VII, page 9
CHAPTER FOUR: FORM AND UNITY

The overall structure of this work is very open, episodic, and follows no traditional formal plan. When asked by David Thomas in their 1997 discussion about his approach to the formal aspects of his compositions Foss replied:

This may surprise you, but I am not the least bit concerned about structure. I let the structure take care of itself, an approach that usually works for me. In so many words, I don't care whether a work develops the form of a sonata or any other form during the compositional process.¹

In this work, the overall form is shaped by the contrasts created by different combinations of the musical devices discussed up to this point. While it would be reasonable to argue that the form follows that of the text, there is a considerable amount of transitional music before, between, and after statements of text that contribute to the overall structure. Structure within each section also varies through the use of contrasts created by the combined musical devices as well as statements of the text.

The internal structure of some sections mimics the overall structure. This is true of the first section of the piece. The segments in this section are very episodic in nature, and alternate the use of differing rhythmic patterns, pitch content, articulation, and texture. Silences between the statements of text also contribute to the structure.

Some sections are easily divisible into two contrasting segments. The first half of section VI, for example features the extremely noisy material created by the scraping of the cowbells in the piano and the repetitions of the multiphonics in the flute. After two statements of text that are sung on repeated notes within this texture there is a five second

¹ Thomas, “A Conversation with Lukas Foss,” 2.
pause. The character of the material that follows creates a second "half," featuring solo voice with Sprechstimme and whispering as well as pianissimo dynamics and a "free flowing" concluding melody.

In others sections, the musical material is essentially the same throughout the entire section with divisions created primarily by the statements of the text. In section VII, for example, the texture of voice and accompaniment with "flexatone obbligato" is used throughout the section as is similar melodic material. Divisions between the segments of this section are created by the statements of the text and made stronger through the use of long silences. In section XI, the musical material is also the same throughout the whole of the section; the division is made stronger by a change in key as well as a repetition of the pattern in the voice where a statement of text is first shouted and then sung.

The quality of the transitions between the notated sections can be markedly abrupt. This is true of the transition from the first section into the second. The solo flute material that enters after the last statement of the text in section I serves as a type of short coda in which the flute both emphasizes the B-F tritone as well as uses expansions of timbre. This music is then "cut off" (Foss' indication) by the percussionist throwing bowls into the piano.
Example: *Abrupt transition, sections I and II, page 4.*

Another example of an abrupt transition may be found between sections XI and XII. The end of the eleventh section is a continuation of the material heard throughout the section itself, which features the pianist playing on the keyboard. The music is metered and the melodic and harmonic materials are diatonically related. This is suddenly interrupted by the crashing of a bowl and cowbell being thrown into the piano. Though not technically part of the transition, the percussion entrance a few seconds later with the Jew’s harp serves to sustain the idea that the music is going in a completely different direction.

An extremely abrupt transition also occurs from the coda of the fifth major section to the sixth. The flute solo that enters after the last entrance of the voice features grace-note gestures that create a pitch center on D, which is followed by the repetition of the F-sharp-C tritone with extended timbre techniques including blowing while playing key clicks and playing and singing in unison. The abrupt transition begins after five seconds of silence as the scraping cowbell/flute multiphonics mentioned above enters.
Example: *Abrupt transition, section V, page 7.*

Other transitional material is considerably smoother. For instance, the end of section IV features a flute solo where the flutist repeats a major ninth, the lower note of which is D. This flows into a flute solo where the flutist plays grace-note gestures that gradually expand upward in range but always finish on the same D. The solo material that follows also creates a smooth transition into the entrance of the voice. It finishes with the emphasis of the E-flat-A tritone, played traditionally as well as with key clicks. This transparent texture features a diminuendo that leads into a soft, dolce strum in the piano where one of the outer pitches is D-sharp, the enharmonic equivalent of the E-flat heard in the tritone.
Unity

Finally, though Foss uses such a great variety within and among the various sections by employing the above mentioned compositional devices, he also creates unity through the repetition of specific ideas. Melodic material throughout the work relates to the six pitches featured in the flute grace-note pattern that starts the piece: B, F, F-sharp, G, C, and C-sharp; this group sometimes includes the E found in the C major chord played by the piano. Foss also uses the tritone throughout the work, especially those that are contained within the above mentioned collection of pitches: B-F, F-sharp-C, and C-sharp-G. Foss also creates unity through the use the metronome marking, "quarter note equals sixty," pitch centers, the voice and accompaniment texture, and specific instrumental/vocal gestures. Additionally, Foss uses some of these devices to create unity within contrasting portions of a single section.

The first section is saturated with the six pitches: B, F, F-sharp, G, C, C-sharp, and E; they appear in the flute, voice, and piano in both melodic and harmonic material. Throughout the work, these pitches are used in different orders, fragmented and transposed. In section III, for example, Foss uses the pitches B, C, F, and G for the melody in the voice on the text, "In the autumn winds." In the same section, on the text, "It was a small part of the pantomime," Foss uses the E, F, G, B, C-sharp and F-sharp. This melody is then repeated in the left hand of the piano in the piano/percussion coda of this section.
Example: Unity through melodic content, section III, page 5.

In section VII, a subset of the pitch collection is presented in both transposed statements and also at the original pitch level. The pitches in the melody for the text, "O thin men of Haddam," when placed in order from lowest to highest are the same as those for the text, "It was a small part of the," from section III, transposed up one half-step.
Example: Transposed melodic material, section VII, page 9.

At the end of the same section, on the text, "Walks around the feet of the women about you," the pitches F, G, B, and C-sharp are all from the original collection. Additionally, the gesture in the piano that ends the section combines these pitches into two harmonic seconds: F-G and B-C-sharp, which are further emphasized through the use of varied timbre created by the muting of the strings inside the piano.

In section X the pitches from this collection are used for the melodic material shared by the piano and voice. The material is augmented slightly with the addition of single G-sharp eighth note and a single D eighth note, but otherwise the pitches for the whole of the melodic material come from the collection. Also, the fragment F, G, B, C-sharp heard in ascending order in section III and in section VII also appears in the melody at the end of section X under the text, "Even the bawds of euphony."

Pitches from the collection are also part of the melodic material in the first half of section XI and the whole of the melodic material in section XII. In section XIII the pitches appear in the melodic segment on the text, "it was going to snow," in the same order as in "it was a small part of the pantomime," but a whole step lower. The most striking use of the material is the return of the exact pitches that Foss used in the opening line of the text for the last line of the text.

Though the tritone is common within the statements of the above mentioned
melodic material, it is also emphasized in much more obvious ways, including through repetition, use in a solo texture, in combination with special effects, and in conjunction with distinctive dynamics.

The first example of the emphasis of a tritone occurs in the solo flute material in the coda of section I. As previously discussed, the flute varies the timbre on the repeated pitches B and F through the use of harmonics and the trill key. Also noteworthy here is that the fundamental pitches fingered to create the high B harmonic are part of the original collection. The B-F tritone is also the last sound heard in the piece, emphasized by its execution with key clicks, use in a solo texture, and pianissimo dynamic level.

The C-F-sharp tritone is emphasized in many sections. The first appearance is in the second half and coda of section II. The voice sings a line whose outer pitches range from C to F-sharp and contains repetitions of these pitches. The flute then echoes this pattern in the following solo coda while flutter tonguing. At the end of section V the C-F-sharp tritone is repeated in the flute solo and used with extended timbres such as key clicks and the flutist playing and singing simultaneously. It is further emphasized by its contrast with the lyric material in the voice that preceded it. In section XII the C-F-sharp tritone is repeated in the voice on the text, “The blackbird must be flying.” The tritone is emphasized by its use in solo texture, register, and forte dynamic level.

In addition to the use of the pitch collection and the emphasis of the tritone, Foss creates unity through the use of the metronome marking of a “quarter note equal sixty,” pitch centers, the voice and accompaniment texture, and specific instrumental/vocal gestures.

The “quarter note equals sixty” marking first occurs in section I with the entrance
of the voice. As previously mentioned, steady tempo throughout section I is distorted by the use of silences, the use of a “free” rhythmic quality, and an accelerando. The “quarter note equals sixty marking,” however, provides unity within the section with its return for the last statement of text, “…thing/Was the eye of the blackbird.” The marking appears again at the beginning of section III after the dropping of bowls inside the piano, which of course provided no sense of tempo. The marking returns again at the end of section III and is reestablished at beginning of section IV after a lengthy and indeterminate pause. The marking returns in the middle portion of section V, having been abandoned during a flute solo, and again at the very end of section VI.

Foss also repeats the simple “voice plus accompaniment” type of texture throughout the work. This type of texture occurs in section II, where the voice is first “accompanied” by the dropping of bowls into the piano and then by plucked pitches inside the piano. In section IV this texture returns with the voice accompanied by strummed gestures in the piano and obbligato-like material in the flute. This texture also occurs in section V, where the voice is accompanied by traditionally played chords in the piano. Sections VII and VIII again feature the texture of voice and accompaniment with obbligato-like material and as do sections XII and XIII.

Specific instrumental gestures that are repeated throughout the work include the grace-note patterns in the flute, whispering in the voice, and the use of the felt mallet on the low strings of the piano. The grace-note pattern first occurs with the entrance of the flute in sections I, returning in section III, V, VIII, and IX within varying textures and structural positions. Whispering in the voice is first heard with the text, “Like a tree,” in section II and is repeated in sections VI with the text, “traced in the shadow,” and XIII on
the text, "It was snowing." The felt mallet on the low strings of the piano only occurs twice, but is noteworthy in that it is heard in the flute solo coda at the end of section I and again just before the piece ends in the same two-part texture.

Unity is also created by the use of pitch centers. One example of this is the use of the pitch center C. In the opening section this is created through the use of the C-major chord in the piano combined with repetitions of the middle C and its use as the lowest note in the section. This sonority returns in the first half of section XI where it is created by the use of melodic material that outlines the C-major chord as well as with functional triadic harmony.

In addition to creating unity between the sections of the work, Foss often creates unity within the contrasting portions of a single section. The best example of this is section III. As described before, the material at the beginning of the section is free and features glissandi in the flute and voice. Adding to this texture, however, is the repetition of the pitch B, played on the B string on the piano with triangle beaters. This pattern is heard from the beginning of the section and continues without stopping, even when the other instruments are tacit. When the completely new texture, rhythm, and melody are added at the bottom of the page, the repeated B is an integral part of the texture.

Conclusion

A thorough investigation of the musical parameters of this work reveals an amazing combination of compositional techniques. Foss' *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* is truly saturated with musical ideas that make the study of it extremely rewarding. The variety of timbre, melodic contour, rhythm, texture, and other devices
affords Foss the material he needs to create a complete synthesis of the music and text.
CHAPTER FIVE: TEXT/MUSIC RELATIONSHIP

Wallace Stevens and the Poem

Written in 1917, the poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" was included in Wallace Stevens' first major published collection of poems, *Harmonium*, in 1923.¹ Wallace Stevens is highly regarded as one of the major American poets of the twentieth century. He was born in Reading, Connecticut in 1879 and studied at Harvard and New York Law School, from which he graduated in 1903. Stevens was admitted to the New York bar in 1904 and began a successful career as an insurance lawyer. In 1916 he moved to Hartford Connecticut where he would eventually become the Vice President of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company in 1934. Stevens died in Hartford in 1955 at the age of 76.

In the years surrounding the writing of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Stevens regularly submitted poems to and was published by a serial entitled *Poetry*. Though he was much admired by his contemporaries and had a profound influence on some of his younger contemporaries, Stevens' did not receive immediate widespread recognition.² He was unhappy with the critical reception of *Harmonium* and ceased to write poems throughout the 1920s.³ Stevens began writing again in the 1930s and published many limited editions including *Ideas of Order* (1935), *The Man with the

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¹ The poem in its entirety may be found in Appendix A.
Blue Guitar (1937), and Notes toward a Supreme Fiction (1942). Additionally, Stevens published a book of collected essays entitled, The Necessary Angel (1951), in which he expressed his thoughts on the aesthetics of poetry. The publication of his Collected Poems in 1954 finally brought him the widespread recognition that he deserved, receiving two National Book Awards and a Pulitzer Prize.⁴

While Stevens’ works display many influences ranging from romanticism in poetry to Cubism in painting, he was primarily influenced by his own life experiences and observations as well as by his love for and skepticism of language itself.⁵ Most importantly, he was influenced by his curiosity about the relationship between the imagination and reality as well as the many facets of perception. Stevens’ style in general has been called wholly original, exuberant, sensuous and indulgent. It is colorful, playful and full of image and often includes unusual words, odd combinations of words and words for the sake of their sounds.

The Poem

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” is a series of thirteen stanzas in free verse that vary greatly in content but are unified by their inclusion of the blackbird in some manner. Robert Buttel describes the title as a humorous allusion to “the Cubists’ practice of incorporating into unity and stasis a number of possible views of the subject observed over a span of time.”⁶ This description of the title also works for the poem as it

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⁴ Sharp, Wallace Stevens, 177.
⁶ Buttel, Making of Harmonium, 165.
is indeed an embodiment of different views of a single subject, the blackbird, over a span of time. Though certainly not presented in a chronological order, the stanzas all vary in tense and each features a unique perception of, or relationship with, the blackbird.

On a smaller scale, the poem features many unusual words and combinations of words, often chosen not for meaning but for sound. Stevens, in a letter to Renato Poggioli, who was translating poems of Stevens into Italian, explained about his use of the city name of Haddam:

> The thin men of Haddam are entirely fictitious although some years ago one of the citizens of that place wrote to me to ask what I had in mind. I just like the name. It is an old whaling town, I believe. In any case, it has a completely Yankee sound.  

Other particularly unusual words or combinations of words include, “equipage,” “barbaric glass,” and “bawds of euphony.”

The use of unusual words and combinations of words make for many fantastic and sometimes absurd images. When experiencing phrases like, “He rode over Connecticut in a glass coach,” or “At the sight of blackbirds flying in a green light,” the reader may try to make sense out of what is seemingly nonsense. It is important to note that while Stevens uses these odd combinations of words, the whole poem is not a series of this type of statement. If it were, one might give up trying to make some sense of it. Stevens provides just enough recognizable images to make the reader keep trying to “see” what is going on in the poem.

Stevens, in a letter to L.W. Payne, Jr., explained specifically that, “This group of poems is not meant to be a collection of epigrams or ideas, but of sensations.”

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8 Ibid., 251.
same letter Stevens talked about another poem of his entitled, “Domination of Black,” explaining that one is supposed to feel as they would feel if they were experiencing what was happening in the poem. So, if “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” is meant to be a “series of sensations,” then perhaps one is also supposed to have similar types of experiences to that of someone reading “Domination of Black.” The sensations one might experience could certainly parallel the humor and mystery that attracted Lukas Foss.

Musical setting of the text

In his article entitled, “On the Uneasy Marriage of Music and Poetry,” Foss discusses the issues that surround the complex relationship between poetry and music when combined in a single musical work. The discussion is certainly not new; multiple articles and books have attempted to define and describe the relationship in some way. Because the relationship is so complex and is certainly not a linear one, it is often difficult to find a clear, precise and meaningful way to describe or analyze it.

Foss states clearly that the poem comes first. He made this clear from the onset when describing how he came to write this piece. He had kept the poem “on top of his drawer” for some time and was attracted to its humor, mystery, and imagery. Additionally, he felt that the poem was very visual. In our conversation, I asked Foss if there were certain parameters that he thought were most important when setting a text. He replied that he thought that meaning was very important as well as getting the text

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9 Ibid.
across. Also, he explained that when you read a visual poem, music comes into your head. 11

In his article, Foss discusses many facets of the music/text relationship before finally coming to the point of what the options of the composer actually are: imitation, contradiction, and independence. Foss defines imitation in this context as:

Following the inflections of the poem in rhythm and mood; this is a cavalier-like attempt at illustrating meaning through sound. The danger is duplication, redundancy and pseudo-translation.

Contradiction, Foss explains, is the opposite. Foss maintains that contradiction is a special effect rather than a technique, used mainly for relief from imitation. The third option, independence, is when the music is oblivious of the poem, with the words and the music ignoring each other. Foss says, “This procedure may make one wonder why this poem rather than another is being used.” 12

To use Foss’ terminology from above, his setting of Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird is a good example of a balance between imitation and contradiction. It is also a good example of mixture of techniques that are related to his options but are slightly more specific. While a composer is certainly able to specifically contradict or imitate, he or she may also elaborate, vary, expand, develop, reinforce, or exaggerate (this list could obviously go on). Furthermore, while a composer is able to do all-of-the-above in relationship to the rhythm and the mood, he or she may also choose to act on different facets of the text, including the sounds of the words themselves or the possible emotional responses of the audience. He or she is also able to do all of these things with varying degrees of immediacy. Furthermore, he or she may choose to employ more than

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one action simultaneously with different musical devices. Foss' setting of *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* is an example of a setting where the composer takes many actions (imitation, contradiction, expansion, etc.), on many different layers of the poem, in many degrees of immediacy. It is this complex relationship that makes it such a compelling, adventurous and meaningful setting.

Foss' *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* has many things in common with the poem. In the broadest sense, Foss and Stevens are connected through similar philosophies and ideas. Neither is easily put into a specific compositional school nor limits himself to only one way of working. Stevens had a skepticism of language and Foss had a similar skepticism of notation.

The musical work and the poem are connected on a conceptual level as well. Neither work was meant to follow a pre-prescribed form. Both the poem and the music feature a combination of a large variety of devices with a sense of unity maintained through the repetition of specific devices. This combination and sense of unity are more important than any single parameter. Foss' use of expanded timbre is comparable to Stevens' use of words for their sound properties; both are able to produce "absurd" results. The improvisation in the musical work, where some part of the musical expression is arbitrary, parallels the idea that the object in the poem, at which there are thirteen ways of looking, does not have to be a blackbird. Additionally, Foss' use of acoustic instruments to create "electronic" sounds parallels the concept of Stevens trying to challenge the readers' sense of perception.

On a more tangible level, the musical work imitates different aspects of the form of the poem. The overall form of the musical work is divided into thirteen sections, most
clearly by Foss' use of Roman numerals in the score. The music between the statements of text is describable as introduction, interlude, or conclusion simply because the absence of text and relative duration keeps it from having an independent quality. One definite expansion of the form of the poem is Foss' repetition of certain fragments of text, though this practice is the exception rather than the rule.

The form and musical content within a section can also imitate the form and content of a stanza of text. In section VI, for example, the first part of the stanza contains the text, "Icicles filled the long window/with barbaric glass./The shadow of the blackbird crossed it to and fro." This text contains a lot of motion as well as striking images. The music for this portion of the stanza is very noisy, featuring the cowbell glissando on the piano strings and repeated notes in the flute. Foss changes the music for the last line of the stanza, "The mood traced in the shadow/An indecipherable cause." The texture under this stanza is much thinner and Foss uses Sprechstimme and whispering in the voice to create a mysterious "mood."

Other stanzas of text feature only one basic idea, as in stanza IV. This stanza features the line of text, "A man and a woman/Are one," followed by an expansion of this idea, "A man and a woman and a blackbird/Are one." The music is this section stays essentially the same throughout through its use of the same instrumentation, texture, and pitch content. Foss does expand the material slightly by setting the second statement of the text, "Are one," with a larger interval in addition to the added pitches needed to accommodate the additional syllables of text.

In some cases Foss imitates a word with very obvious text painting. In section I, the line including the word "mountains," for example, is extremely disjunct, possibly
mimicking the jagged edges of the mountain top. Within the same section the word “moving” is included in a short musical segment with an accelerando. In section V the word “whistling” is sung on a descending major third with the first note much shorter than the second. In the sixth section the text “to and fro” is sung on a melodic segment that leaps up a major ninth and right back down again. Probably the most obvious example is the use of glissandi on the word, “whirled” in section III which is also echoed in the flute.

Example: Obvious text painting, sections I, III, V, and VI.

Foss sometimes governs the character of a whole section with a single word from the corresponding stanza of text. One of the most striking examples of this occurs in
section V. The fifth stanza of text is, “I do not know which to prefer/The beauty of
inflections/Or the beauty of innuendos/The blackbird whistling/Or just after. The musical
material in this section is comparatively “beautiful.” The melodic lines are built of thirds
and fifths and have lyric contours. The voice and the piano have a diatonic relationship
and there are no special timbral effects set under the text. The rhythm is much freer and
follows the natural “inflections” of the text. The harmony is based on major triads.
Additionally, the dynamic level stays the same throughout the whole of the statement of
the text.

In section II, the whole of the section is governed by the number three. The
stanza of text for this section is, “I was of three minds/Like a tree/In which there are three
blackbirds.” Foss opens the section with three crashes of dropped bowls inside the piano.
He also repeats the text fragment, “I was of three minds,” three times. The melodic
pitches used on each repetition of the text fragment, “I was of three,” are those of a B-
major triad and the highest note, the F-sharp, is repeated three times. This repetition of
the F-sharp is also used in the melodic material on the text, “In which there are three
blackbirds.”

Another example of this idea is section IV. In addition to exemplifying how the
form of the music can be governed by the form of the poem, this section also contains a
reference to the idea of “oneness” in the stanza of text. Each time the voice line
concludes a line of text on the word “one,” it is on the pitch D just below the treble staff.
This pitch is echoed by the flute after each statement within the same register.
Additionally, this repetition is combined with the use of D’s two octaves apart as the
outer notes of the strummed gesture in the piano to create a pitch center on D.
In section XI Foss seems to be having fun with the word Connecticut. The main rhythmic pattern of an eighth note, followed by two sixteenths, followed by another eighth, imitates the intrinsic speech rhythm of the word, “Connecticut.”

\[ \text{Example: Connecticut rhythm, section XI, page 13.} \]

On a less immediate level, Foss gives the music a more “traditional” sound through the use of tonally functional triadic harmonies, homophonic texture, recognizable meter with syncopation, and idiomatic use of the piano. In an interview with Mary Elizabeth Shea, Foss describes this section as both “that American moment with the coach,” and “neo-folk,” and explains that it was made up “alla square dance.”\textsuperscript{13} The shouting of the voice could be compared with the person calling the square dance. Connecticut is an American state; the music sounds American.

This section is also an example of Foss emphasizing one element during the main part of a section while deferring the depiction of another element until a later time. The music after the last statement of text is a continuation of the accompanimental music heard with the text. Suddenly, there is an extremely abrupt crash of bowls and cowbells being thrown into the piano. This music could be described as a sort of programmatic gesture in which Foss could be contributing a narrative continuation. In the eleventh

\textsuperscript{13} Shea, “Middle-Period Compositions,” 313.
stanza of text a man is riding over Connecticut in a glass coach and a fear is piercing him. Foss seemingly ignores this part of the text during the “square dance.” Here, in the crashing of the bowls cowbells, Foss could be depicting the crash of the carriage itself. With the entrance of the Jew’s harp, one can almost see one of the wheels rolling off into the distance. The image is funny and eerie at the same time.

The solo flute music at the beginning of section VII is another example of an instrumental section continuing an idea from the preceding stanza of text. The last line of the sixth stanza of text contains the word “indecipherable.” The music for solo flute that follows contains bent pitches that vary in range and length. The resulting sound is very odd and could be described as “indecipherable” as well.

The music within a section sometimes serves to create a mood that reflects the text. In section XIII, for example, the text is, “It was evening all afternoon/It was snowing/And it was going to snow./The blackbird sat in the cedar limbs.” The mood of this section is very quiet and still, almost depicting the quietness one experiences during snowfall. The irony in the statements of text, “It was evening all afternoon,” and, “It was snowing/And it was going to snow” comes through in the music through in the mysterious sounds created by the taped echo and the use of expanded timbre in the flute in the last moments of the piece. Foss leaves the piece somewhat open-ended through ending with a repeated, unresolved tritone, as if to suggest that there are more ways to look.

Foss sometimes contradicts elements of the poem while simultaneously imitating others. In the opening line of the voice, for example, the rhythm is strict quarter notes in a tempo of a “quarter note equals sixty,” contradicting the natural rhythm of the text.
The pitch of the line, however, emphasizes the natural stress pattern of the text by placing most of the accented syllables on the highest notes in the line. Foss then varies the structure of the stanza of text, “Among twenty snowy mountains,” by repeating it. In the second repetition of text, Foss changes the rhythm to a combination of eighth notes and dotted quarter notes. While this is decidedly more free than the first statement, it still contradicts the natural rhythm of the text by placing the long notes on the unstressed syllable.

In once instance it is unclear whether Foss was ignoring an element of the text or choosing to interpret it in another way. In section VI the text is, “O thin men of Haddam/Why do you imagine golden birds?/Do you not see how the blackbird/Walks around the feet/Of the women about you?” The mood in this section of music is rather exotic and unusual. The singer is asked to sing without vibrato and the harmonic and melodic material feature the emphasis of the tritone. The most unusual sound comes from the dragging of a superball mallet across the sounding board of the piano, resulting in an odd sort of moaning sound. As mentioned earlier, Haddam is a whaling town in Connecticut. Stevens stated that he chose the name because he liked the sound of it and that it had a “Yankee” sound. Foss is seemingly either unaware of this relationship or simply emphasizes some other idea or quality of the stanza; the exotic or mysterious sounds could be an attempt to musically depict the idea of the imagination of golden birds or to play on the fact that the whole of the stanza is interrogative.

Foss’ discussion of the relationship of music and poetry provides helpful insight into how to examine this relationship in his works. Foss claims that the composer “uses”
a text and calls the act of setting a poem, "A loving act of violence." So, while it is true that the composer has the power to change the listeners' reception of the poem, in the case of Foss' setting of *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, it is evident that a composer may do so with great joy and with great care. The result is an expressive and meaningful transmission.

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CHAPTER SIX: THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD AS A REPRESENTATIVE WORK

Foss used and explored many different compositional techniques before composing *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*; however, many of the same philosophies have governed the whole of his compositional output. Steven Ledbetter in his liner notes for the 2003 Chandos recording of Foss' opera *Griefflkin* says the following:

From his early years to present, Foss’ works show the record of an inquiring mind, one that loves music, and absorbs ideas and procedures from all quarters, then with the philosopher’s stone of his own imagination, transmutes them into something new.¹

Foss is adamantly against being labeled as a specific “type” of composer. When asked by David Thomas how he felt about different schools of composition, Foss replied:

I don’t believe in belonging to any school at all. I think we’re confusing issues when we talk about ‘belonging to schools’. If someone claims to be a ‘twelve-tone composer,’ it is as if Bach said, ‘I am a fugue composer,’ and then refused to write anything but fugues. It does not make sense…²

Though Foss has not wanted to limit himself and certainly does not belong to any school of composition, specific compositional techniques and governing philosophies have influenced his compositions at different times during his career.

Foss’ earliest published works date from 1937 to 1959 and are characterized by a neoclassical musical language and expressions of Americana. These works are traditionally grouped together as Foss’ “early” or “neo-classic” period. Foss had become

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a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1942 and his love for his new-found American homeland was transmitted in much of the music from this period. His work from this era has been called, "A unification of the best of European neo-classicism and a Copland-like Americanism." Major works composed at this time include *The Prairie* (1944), a large-scale work for chorus and orchestra on a poem of Carl Sandburg and the biblical cantata, *Song of Songs* (1946). Also included in this period are another biblical cantata, *Song of Anguish* (1945), and two operas, *The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* (1949) and *Griffelkin* (1955). These works feature the use of traditional formal structures, bi-tonality and poly-tonality, motivic development, and lyric melodies. The works from the early period are also written for traditional instrumental ensembles including violin and piano, solo piano, solo instruments and orchestra, and chorus and orchestra.

Works dating from 1960 to 1975 show a much different approach to composition. These works are characterized by sounds resulting from the experimentation Foss did with his improvisation ensemble as well as his exploration of the composer-performer relationship. This period of works is traditionally called his "middle," "experimental," or "avant-garde" period. The most famous piece from this period (and the one that marks its beginning) is *Time Cycle* (1960), a work for soprano and orchestra or chamber ensemble. Other major works include *Echoi III*, which was an experiment in "free-serialism," and *Baroque Variations* for orchestra in which Foss used the technique of collage and for which he invented the technique of inaudible playing. In addition to collage and the

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experimentation with twelve-tone technique, Foss experimented with different types of chance procedures, most of which included choices for the performer (as opposed to those that govern the composition). Combinations of instruments are also more varied and include many different configurations of performing forces. Paradigm (1968) is a work written for percussionist/conductor, electric guitar, and three other instruments capable of sustaining a sound, Ni bruit ni vitesse (1972) is for two pianos and two percussionists, and Lamdeni (1973) is for chorus and plucked and beaten sounds.

The works that date from 1976 to the present are characterized by a revisiting of the techniques used in the early period combined with those discovered in the middle period. This period is typically referred to as the “late” or “third” period. Lukas Foss identifies The American Cantata as the piece that marks the exact start of the third period. “I used some of my earlier music, in a sense and combined it with some of my complex experimental music.” 5 Foss explains:

I found myself forced to get back into the spirit of American music, with a capitol A. And that wasn’t easy at first, and then it became rather delightful because what happened was that I got back to tonality. I hadn’t really worked with tonality for a long time. Now the trick was, could I be as experimental and as wild and as crazy with tonal, American music? I found that it was possible. I was amalgamating my middle period-wild, experimental style with my earlier style. Putting the two things together became a great deal of fun. 6

Composed in 1978, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird could be called an early “third period” work. With this piece Foss continues the trend he began in American Cantata by incorporating some of the compositional devices and philosophies from his early and middle works.

The most obvious way that this work connects to middle period works is the use

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6 Shea, “Middle-Period Compositions,” 190.
of expanded timbral sonorities. The choice of the combination of performing forces in this work (piano, flute, voice and percussion) used to create these sonorities is noteworthy in that Foss mentioned these instruments specifically in an interview in 1963. When talking about reactions to the electronic music movement, Foss made the observation that the traditional limitations of the voice and instruments no longer applied, especially if acoustic music was to compete with electronic music. He mentioned precisely the four instruments used in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* in the following observation:

> Traditional limitations of voice and instrument have proved to be mythical: the piano was the first instrument to expand, the flute underwent a change of personality...the human voice followed; percussion came into its own.\(^7\)

Foss is very clear in his explanation of the source of the sounds from the inside of the piano:

> I had made a study of possibilities obtained from sounds inside the piano in an earlier work for two pianos and percussion. My song cycle is based on some of the finds in that piece, *Ni bruit ni vitesse*, and in a song cycle, *Three Airs for Frank O'Hara's Angel*.\(^8\)

Foss experimented with woodwind multiphonics as well as other extended techniques in *Orpheus* (1972) and in *Cave of Winds* (1972),\(^9\) and the uses of the special effects for voice, including shouting, whispering, glissandi, and Sprechstimme may be found in *Fragments of Archilochos* (1965), *Three Airs for Frank O'Hara's Angel* (1972), and *Time Cycle* (1960). In *Three Airs for Frank O'Hara's Angel*, Foss also consciously attempted to reproduce electronically generated sounds through the use of the expanded

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\(^7\) Childs and Schwarz, eds, “Changing Composer performer relationship,” 327
\(^8\) “Liner notes,” *Face on the Bar Room Floor*.
\(^9\) Shea, “Middle-Period Compositions,” 159-160.
timbres of acoustic instruments.\textsuperscript{10}

_Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird_ also relates to earlier works from the middle period in his use of certain intervals. The major ninth and major seventh intervals that are common in the melodic material of this work were a main feature of the melodic material in _Time Cycle_.

Another fairly obvious influence of the middle period on _Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird_ is the use of improvisation and unusual notation. As with his works from the middle period, the chance procedures in this work are usually controlled, with only one or two parameters being actually improvised. The use of unusual notation is of course related to these chance procedures as well as to the use of the expanded timbres discussed above.

One final way that _Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird_ relates to the works of the middle period is through its incorporation of visual or theatrical elements. In his later middle period works, including _Orpheus_ and _Concerto for Solo Percussion and Orchestra_, Foss included theatrical elements including specific lighting and actions for the performers.\textsuperscript{11} In _Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird_, Foss asks for the flutist to either be distant or offstage. Additionally, though not specifically notated as a theatrical device, the coordination of the work inside the piano for the pianist and percussionist can be as visually stimulating as it is aurally stimulating.

_Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird_ also shares characteristics with Foss’ early compositions. In this work Foss uses lyric melodies, motivic development, pitch centers and triadic harmonies, all musical devices found in his neo-classic compositions.

\textsuperscript{10} Shea, “Middle-Period Compositions,” 150.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 173.
In 1980, in the liner notes of the first recording of this work, Foss explains the connection to earlier works as well as why he incorporates earlier traits:

Perhaps this is a typical pattern of the artistic development of a composer: one work contains the seeds of the next. Stylistically, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* is an odd combination of the tonal lyricism of my early music and the experimental sonorities of my most recent work.  

When Mary Elizabeth Shea, in her interview with Foss in 1995, asked him to explain the neo-classic elements in this piece, Foss responded differently:

I don’t think that there are any neo-classic elements in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. Except that “American” moment maybe with the coach, but that’s not neo-classic, that’s more neo-folk. It’s just plain setting the words, and I don’t think there’s any mixture of styles in that piece.  

This apparent contradiction may be explained by the fact that in 1995 it had been close to twenty years since Foss had composed *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Blackbird*. It also may have been that Foss’ definition of “neo-classical” was more narrow and that he used neo-classic devices in this piece to a far lesser extent. In either case, it is reasonable to say that the inclusion of elements from Foss’ early period in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* go beyond the few neo-classic devices that he used. As mentioned above, Foss’ incorporation of things “American” is also a prevalent characteristic in the early works. In the same interview with Shea, when asked about the origin of the tune in section eleven, Foss replied that there was no origin, saying, “It’s made up alla square dance music.” This quasi ‘square dance’ and also the use of the Jew’s harp contribute a definite, if minor, American facet to the work.

Another issue to consider is Foss’ choice and treatment of the text. In this work,

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12 Foss, Lukas, “Liner Notes,” *The Face on the Bar Room Floor.*
13 Shea, “Middle-Period Compositions,” 313.
14 Ibid.
Foss sets a recognized work by a recognized poet or traditional source (the bible, adapted fairy tale or book), in its entirety and in the order in which it was written. Also, the governing idea behind the setting is the transmission of the meaning and the mood of the poem and the poem is sung by a singer. These qualities are much more in line with the choices and treatments of Foss’ earlier vocal works. The Prairie, for example, is a setting of a Carl Sandburg poem in which Foss’ intent is to express his love for his new homeland, and in Song of Songs Foss chooses text from the bible.

This situation is very different from the choice and treatment of text used in many of the middle period works. In that era Foss chose many different types of texts from unusual sources including a lecture he presented, a diary entry, and separate fragments of an obscure ancient text. These texts were often broken into syllables, spoken by a narrator, or juxtaposed in unusual ways. In Fragments of Archilochos, for example, Foss sets fragments of text in an aleatoric context. This causes the resulting meaning to be different every time it is performed. In Paradigm, text is used in a purely instrumental work, with the performers speaking text into microphones or into their instruments. Time Cycle and De Profundis both feature texts in two different languages.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Foss’ setting of Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird is a wonderful example of the philosophies that have governed his later works. Drawing from his previous experiences and philosophies, Foss chose whatever he needed to create the music inspired by the poem. In his interview with David Thomas Foss said, “It is my opinion that the more techniques a composer employs, the richer his or her vocabulary will be...I
like to use all available techniques, because that makes the music more adventurous."

This setting contains an extraordinary number of compositional ideas and devices. The expanded timbral sonorities combined with the great variety of melodic, rhythmic, harmonic and textural material create a piece that is saturated with noteworthy features. Foss’ *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* is an intriguing example of an adventurous, surprising, funny and joyful piece that reflects the care, integrity and generosity of spirit with which Foss approached the setting of the text and his composition in general. Perhaps one characteristic of a successful piece is that it is as satisfying to study as it is to hear.

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APPENDIX A: "THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD"
BY WALLACE STEVENS

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds

III
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV
A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

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

VI
Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.
VII
O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII
I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

IX
When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X
At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI
He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

XII
The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII
It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar limbs.

APPENDIX B: A SELECT LIST OF OTHER SETTINGS OF “THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD”

Peggy Glanville-Hicks (1912-1990)

*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (1948)

For voice and piano

Published by Weintraub in 1955

Glanville-Hicks was the first composer to set this poem. She had this to say about the text, “The poetic images in the poems are of a fantasy nature, the words, crisp, piercing, musical in their sound and rhythm suggestiveness. The verses seemed to me to contain something of the simple intensity of a Troubadour song, of the static intensity of an Arab lament. These things I have tried to embody in the music.”

Vincent Persichetti (1915-1987)

Last setting in song cycle, *Harmonium* (1951)

For soprano and piano

Published by Elkan-Vogel Inc.

The whole of the song cycle features twenty poems taken from the eighty five found in *Harmonium*. There is apparently no direct numerical relationship between the order of the poems in Stevens’ collection and those in the song cycle. The ordering was influenced by Persichetti’s personal feeling that the first nineteen poems culminate in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” and thus chose to put it last. The final song features thematic material found in the first nineteen songs. Persichetti explains, “I discovered that all of the previous nineteen were related musically and poetically, in one way or another.”

Boris Blacher (1903-1975)


For high voice and string orchestra

Published by Bote & Bock

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In the liner notes of the Signum recording of Blacher’s Lieder, Horst Göbel explains that this work belongs to Blacher’s “Quietly reflective, intellectual period in which tonal spareness dominated,” and features, “Whirring and pointillist material [which] provides very little support for the singer except for an occasional duplication of the vocal line. Wallace Stevens’ fantasy texts are illustrated in the music to create the impression of an ice-flower or of birds fluttering past.”

**Allan Blank (b. 1925)**

*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (1964-5)
For soprano, flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass clarinet, piano, violin/viola and cello
New York: Composers Facsimile Edition

The composer explains, “My involvement with the poem dates back to approximately 12 years before the completion of the work. The attraction of the poem then, as later when I decided to return to the sketches, was not its poetic rhythms but the central issue of movement. I saw the movement crystallized in a number of key words and images, which interlock throughout...Formally the work combines variation procedures with closed, non-repetitive lines....The harmonic/melodic approach is influenced by serial thinking.”

**James J. Hartway (b. 1944)**

For soprano, flute, prepared piano, percussion (1974)
*Three Ways of Looking at a Blackbird/Settings of selected parts of the poem*

The composer explains, “The music is intended to reflect and augment man’s relationship to the blackbird and to make that association even more metaphysical. A variety of percussion sounds is used in the score and prepared piano and flute are used both as sound resources and for melodic purposes. The soprano must interpret and articulate the poetry and be sensitive to the nuance and style of the music. In the score proportional notation is employed in order to create a sense of flexibility and fluidity with regard to time.”

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7 Ibid.
Louise Talma (1906-1996)
*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (1979)
For tenor or soprano voice and oboe, flute, or violin
Published by Carl Fischer

In the liner notes of the Athena Trio’s recording of this work, the music is described as an incorporation of twelve-tone and variation techniques, creating a series of atmospheres and patterns for each of Wallace Stevens’ blackbirds.⁸ In an interview with Luann Dragone, Ms. Talma indicated that the work was commissioned by tenor Paul Sperry as a gift for his niece.⁹

Walter Hekster (b. 1937)
*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (1979)
For organ
Published by Donemus (Amsterdam)

Chance composition. “This composition is a graphic representation of the poem, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” by Wallace Stevens.”¹⁰

John Fitz Rogers (b. 1963)
*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (1989)
For soprano and two synthesizers
One manuscript score available at Bowling Green State University

Comment from Wallace Stevens
In a letter to J. Wisse, a Dutch composer, on the occasion that Wisse was going to send Stevens a copy of his cantata, Stevens replied, “I am especially interested in musical settings of my poems. People, however, are so accustomed to emotionalism, at least in songs, that my sort of thing may require a special audience.” ¹¹

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¹¹ Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 739.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


