The Gay Divorce of Music and Dance: Choreomusicality and the Early Works of Cage-Cunningham

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Art is a way of life. It is for all the world like taking a bus, picking flowers, making love, sweeping the floor, getting bitten by a monkey, reading a book... Art when it is art as Satie lived it and made it is not separate from life (nor is dishwashing when it is done in this spirit).

John Cage, 1950

I do the cooking and Merce washes the dishes.

John Cage, 1989

In the wake of Merce Cunningham’s death in July 2009, writers of obituaries, remembrances, and critical appraisals celebrated a life during which the choreographer developed American modern dance into a truly modernist form. He remained in dance’s vanguard for over seventy years, from his...
first professional appearance with the Martha Graham Dance Company in 1939, through his mid-century experiments with chance and late-century experiments with choreographing through Life Forms computer software, to his final 2009 choreography *Nearly Ninety*, completed months before his death at the age of ninety. Cunningham and his critics—whether writing from a formalist or a cultural-historical perspective, with the intent to canonize or to dismiss—have long maintained that his choreography expresses solely the kinesthetic integrity of bodies moving in space and time. His dances eschew narrative. Chance procedures are used to further short-circuit any intended meaning, as well as to abdicate agency and ego. His dances are unlike those of Martha Graham, which depict and revel in all types of drama—psychological, sexual, national, mythological, metaphysical. The unplanned choreomusicality (that is, the relationship between the dance and the music) of Cunningham’s work stands in stark contrast to the music-dependent dances of every other choreographer before him, whether in modern dance or in ballet.3 The resulting distillation to a medium’s specificity has long been celebrated by modernist critics, most especially those in the visual arts.4 John Martin, the first professional full-time US dance critic (rather than, as was previously the practice, a music, theater, society, or even sports columnist covering dance), was a vocal champion of medium specificity in the art form we now call “modern dance.”5 In his 1933 manifesto of that title, he wrote that dance should be predicated neither on narrative nor on preexisting music. His ideal was pure movement that would spark “metakinesis,” or kinesthetic empathy.6 Martin desired “absolute dance.”7 Cunningham, the now familiar dance-historical narrative goes, allowed dance to achieve aesthetic autonomy through his choreography that concerns only the movement itself.

Cunningham’s early choreography, however, was not dissociated from its accompanying music. Far from it: in his early works, which are the focus of this article, dance and music were wedded both structurally and in their

3. For an overview of relationships between music and dance on the concert stage in the first half of the twentieth century, see Jordan, *Moving Music*, 3–61.
4. The art-critical *locus classicus* for medium specificity is Lessing, *Laocoon*, esp. 91–92; its modernist echo is Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon.” For more on the “Greenberg effect” (the tradition of modernist criticism and historiography to ignore, if not outright dismiss, specificity of content in artworks as well as the histories and identities of artists), see Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, esp. 316–17.
5. On the early history of dance criticism in the United States, see Conner, *Spreading the Gospel*.
7. Ibid., 90–92. Martin was particularly bothered by dance that was set to music intended for the concert hall: “There is a long sad story to be told about the use of music for dancing which was never intended to be danced to” (ibid., 114). For more on Martin’s modernist ideology and theory, see Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*, 15–46, and Morris, *Game for Dancers*, 64–86. Cunningham’s choreography met and indeed exceeded most of Martin’s ideals for modern dance, even though the critic remained curiously aloof from Cunningham’s work.
expressive intent. Cunningham’s lifelong partnership, both creative and personal, with composer John Cage is at the root of this early marriage and the later divorce of dance and music. Like most gay relationships in the twentieth century, theirs was not publicly acknowledged for almost the entirety of their time together, even if it eventually became common knowledge within their circle and later an open secret among some audience members. When Cage died in 1992 the New York Times obituary concluded, “Mr. Cage’s marriage to Xenia Andreyevna Kashevaroff ended in divorce in 1945. From 1970 until his death, he lived with Mr. Cunningham. There are no immediate survivors.”

That last sentence was not a sign of disrespect for the Cage-Cunningham relationship; rather, it reflected Cunningham’s wish not to be identified as Cage’s “partner” or “surviving companion” in print. Seventeen years later, in his obituary for Cunningham in the same newspaper, dance critic Alastair Macaulay could more fully acknowledge the couple’s long history, as well as the fact that their relationship, like any other, had not been always perfect:

Cage and Mr. Cunningham also became lovers, and the ensuing breakup of the Cages’ marriage was painful. For many years only a few people realized that the Cage-Cunningham relationship was sexual. . . . John Cage died in 1992. Although he had advocated the autonomy of the arts, he was often a controlling figure. Mr. Cunningham once said of life without Cage: “On the one hand, I come home at the end of the day, and John’s not there. On the other hand, I come home and John’s not there.”

These two Times obituaries reveal how much had changed between 1992 and 2009. Even if Cunningham and Cage felt uncomfortable about broadcasting their relationship publicly throughout most of their lives, it eventually became humdrum public knowledge. When their relationship began in the early 1940s, both men were still discovering not only how to be successful artists but also how to be successful partners in a homophobic world.

Throughout their partnership, Cage and Cunningham maintained, most often implicitly, that their private life was of no relevance to their art, and historiographical consensus has upheld their silence. While this may have represented a desire to honor their wishes, it is at least equally due to a general disdain for biographical criticism and ignorance of the couple’s earliest personal history and collaborations. With few exceptions, scholars do not give sustained attention to specific, demonstrable connections between life and


work in the case of Cage and Cunningham.11 Whereas most writers merely fall silent on the matter, Roger Copeland, in what remains the only single-author academic monograph on Cunningham, explicitly rejects the possibility that the personal (which he conflates with the sexual) could elucidate Cunningham’s oeuvre: “[a] ‘sexual/political’ reading . . . might tell us something of interest about Merce Cunningham, but it would do little to illuminate his art.”12 Copeland cites the quip in which Cage boils down his relationship with Cunningham to a division of labor in the kitchen (and which serves as this article’s second epigraph). Copeland’s intention here is to justify the old New Critical division between work and life. This is a rather different use of the “cooking/dishes” sound bite from that of LGBTQ-history scholar Jonathan Katz, who understands it as Cage “duck[ing] the question [of sexuality],” that of dance critic Alastair Macaulay, who takes it as Cage’s open acknowledgment of their relationship, or those of the many other writers who want to say something, anything, about the couple’s relationship and so turn to the memorable Cage quotation.13 All these writers have actually slightly misquoted this sound bite: Cage said that Cunningham “washes the dishes,” not that he “does the dishes.” This persistent misquotation highlights how frequently biographical detail is

11. Nearly every attempt to theorize the relationship between life and work for Cage and Cunningham begins from the position of what the couple’s work does not express—Roth’s “aesthetic of indifference,” Jones’s “negativity within a dominant heterosexist culture,” Katz’s “politics of negation” and “performative selves,” as well as his reading of 4′ 33″ as queer reverse discourse, and Foster’s reading of Cunningham’s ultrapure, fiercely nondependent choreography as a manifestation of the closet and a larger modernist insensitivity to lived difference: Roth, “Aesthetic of Indifference”; Jones, Finishing School, 653; Katz, “Identification,” 63, 59, and “John Cage’s Queer Silence”; and Foster, Closet Full of Dances. Although the critical lens of each of these writers is sharp and their arguments elegant, their tendency to ignore specifics of the Cage-Cunningham partnership, which developed over fifty years, and to avoid sustained description of any of the dances, results in an ahistorical and somewhat superficial treatment of the couple’s lives and work. Exceptionally, Susan Manning balances formalist and historicist concerns in the few pages on Cunningham in her Modern Dance, Negro Dance; after describing a pair of Cunningham dances in some detail and placing them in the context of the increasing homophobia (even in the New York dance world) at mid-century, “when gay life became terrifying,” she is able to more persuasively demonstrate that “Cunningham’s aesthetic—his disdain for self-expression and his reverence for impersonality—partly served to closet the gay male dancer” (209).

12. Copeland, Merce Cunningham, 258. Earlier in his book Copeland disparages the “race/class/gender gurus” (24) who he believes are intent on debas[ing dance studies. This phrase foreshadows even stronger words and more conservative ideas about the place of identity poetics in humanistic inquiry.

13. Katz, “John Cage’s Queer Silence,” 41; Macaulay, “Merce Cunningham, Dance Visionary, Dies.” Katz cites his 1996 interview with former Cunningham dancer Remy Charlip as the source for Cage’s “cooking/dishes” quip. Katz’s article (first printed in the journal GLQ in 1999, then appearing in the edited collection Writing through John Cage’s Music, Poetry, and Art, and long available online through the website of San Francisco’s Queer Cultural Center) has been the most widely read article on Cage’s sexuality.
relegated to secondhand status and begins to travel far from historical reality. Consider Copeland’s imaginative reconstruction of the sentence’s original context:

In 1989, during a panel discussion of his work, someone (perhaps a gay activist who was into “outing”) tried to put Cunningham and Cage on the spot. Smugly (and no doubt, accusingly) the audience member inquired about the “true nature” of their partnership. Cage chimed in with an exemplary response: “It’s very simple,” he said, “I do the cooking and Merce Cunningham does the dishes.” That, it seems to me, is more than one needs to know about Cunningham’s private life in order to fully appreciate his work.14

In fact, a video of this 1989 panel discussion, which took place as part of a Berkeley symposium, reveals that the “someone” to whom Copeland refers is Wood Massi, a composer and music scholar who taught a course on Cage while a master’s student at Mills College and who later wrote about Cage in his doctoral dissertation at the University of California, San Diego.15 An archival video of the panel confirms that Copeland’s speculative account misrepresents the spirit of both question and response:

David Vaughan, moderator: Yes, somebody in the middle there.

Wood Massi: What is the nature of your personal relationship with each other, and what’s life like with you when you’re at home together in New York City? [Something brief and inaudible follows.]

John Cage: Well, I do the cooking [a long pause, which is filled with the audience’s laughter, cheers, and then applause, at which point Cage, Vaughan, and Cunningham all start giggling; Cage and Cunningham exchange a glance] and Merce washes the dishes. [Cage turns to Cunningham again, they look at each other and laugh more, as does the audience.]16

While one never sees the face of Wood Massi on the video, his voice is quiet and tentative, not confident, and far from “smugly” or “accusingly” pitched. More than anything else, Massi sounds nervous, as if he knows that questions such as “What is your life like off stage?” and “How do you spend your downtime?” are forbidden territory.17 Recalling the Berkeley symposium panel over

15. I am grateful to the anonymous fourth reader of this article for pointing out that Wood Massi was the audience member who asked this question, and I am especially grateful to Wood Massi himself for a long and fascinating phone interview with me on December 6, 2017.
17. Massi’s questions were neither impertinent nor off-topic. Cunningham had just recounted a favorite story about a party in his hometown of Centralia, Washington, decades earlier, at which it was clear that the other attendees expected the composer and choreographer to be somehow different— weird. Cunningham’s recollection concludes with the host of the party
two decades later, Janice Ross (now a professor at Stanford, then a dance writer who covered this event for the *Oakland Tribune*) vividly remembers both the question, which she heard as being asked out of genuine curiosity and without any apparent intent of “outing,” and Cage’s response. Furthermore, the audience’s laughter and cheering sound like joyful support for Cage’s confirmation of his relationship’s quotidian nature at home. (And who would imagine the dance-fan audience at a symposium in Berkeley’s Wheeler Auditorium in 1989 to be unaware of the couple’s personal partnership or hopeful that it remain off-limits?) If taken out of context, it is not apparent that Cage’s memorable response celebrates and confirms a gay relationship. Likewise, isolating Cunningham’s choreography from questions of biography, identity, and intent needlessly deprives one of information that could only further understanding and appreciation of both his life and his work.

The archives are not silent about the Cage-Cunningham personal relationship, even about its beginning in the 1940s—a fairly unusual benefit to one researching gay subjects in an era in which, with fearful and fastidious discretion, gay men often destroyed material traces of their sexual identity and relationships. Taking advantage of this, this article advocates a turn to questions of biographical detail, intentionality, and expression in the works of Cage and Cunningham. Such a focus can illuminate analyses of music, dance, and their interaction without falling into the traps of naivety and the intentional fallacy. This seems even more necessary in view of the longstanding historiographical tendency to sideline questions of homosexuality. Academic writers often approach such questions obliquely but with queer theoretical flair, occasionally seeming either ignorant of or uninterested in lived queer history, or perhaps just afraid of appearing basic. Sometimes, however, one need “only connect.” In the past decade writers addressing a general readership have at last directly discussed the personal relationship saying to the couple as they left, “Oh, thank you for coming and fitting in so well.” Cage was also fond of this story: he used to keep it in rotation among the stories he read on stage during performances of Cunningham’s 1965 dance *How to Pass, Kick, Fall and Run*. The story exists in published form not among the selection of *How to anecdotes* found in Cage, *Year from Monday*, but rather in the untitled section “[Cunningham Stories]” in *John Cage: An Anthology*, 181.


19. Much recent work in musicology, dance, and the humanities has integrated biographical detail and intentionality with conceptual nuance and analytical rigor; see, for example, Levitz, *Modernist Mysteries* (on intentions, see esp. 24–26), and Franko, *Martha Graham in Love and War* (on biography, see esp. 5).

20. When queer historical context is addressed directly but without forcing sexuality to explain everything, the result can be a mind-opening reappraisal of an entire career and oeuvre that is anything but reductive and that attracts both specialist and general readers, such as the reconsideration of E. M. Forster in Moffat, *Great Unrecorded History*, “Only connect” is the epigraph to Forster’s *Howards End*; it later reappears in the novel as the mantra of the intelligent and empathetic heroine, Margaret Schlegel: “Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest”: Forster, *Howards End*, 159.
of Cage and Cunningham. Most recently, Laura Kuhn, director of the John Cage Trust, has selected, edited, and published a representative sample of Cage’s correspondence, including letters from her own personal collection that are invaluable for an understanding of the couple’s early relationship. This article builds on her work and introduces other previously unexplored archival materials. Considering this biographical material together with analyses of collaborations in rehearsal, live performance, and on film, I show how the lives of Cage and Cunningham affected and informed their works without reducing one to the other.

Contrary to Copeland, and pace Cage and Cunningham, this article demonstrates the deliberate interdependence of life and work in the lesser-known early works of composer and choreographer as well as in their decades-long fascination with the music of Satie, culminating in Cage’s Cheap Imitation and Cunningham’s Second Hand (both 1970). First, I highlight the thematic content of Cunningham’s earliest collaborations with Cage (Credo in Us, 1942, and Four Walls, 1944), including consideration of the previously unknown script that Cunningham wrote for Four Walls, as well as Cage’s The Perilous Night of 1943–44, which he presented at the Cage-Cunningham 1944 debut performance. I argue that the couple’s expressive intention in all three of these works was an indictment of relationships that repress sexual desire for the sake of social conformity. I then examine Cunningham’s choreography for and performance in Graham’s Appalachian Spring (1944) in the context of these early Cage-Cunningham collaborations. The fact that it was Cunningham, not Graham, who choreographed the Revivalist’s dances in Appalachian Spring remains almost as little known as the Revivalist’s music that Aaron Copland cut when transforming the dance’s complete score for thirteen instruments into its more familiar orchestral suite of 1945. From the dance’s 1944 premiere to Cunningham’s final performance with the company in 1946, the section of Appalachian Spring that critics and audiences loved most was the Revivalist’s solo, in which Cunningham turned his virtuosic technique and clear choreographic vision against Graham’s celebration of marriage (and against her own artistic and personal partnership with Erick Hawkins). I argue that it is no accident that the condemnation of a newly married, tradition-abiding heterosexual couple was conceived and choreographed by a man who was not only tired of performing supporting roles in heterosexual dramas but also very much in love with another man who was married to a woman.

In the second half of this article I examine the works choreographed to the music of the couple’s beloved Erik Satie, focusing on the first and last of these choreographies, both of them to Satie’s symphonic drama Socrate: the solo Idyllic Song (1944) and Second Hand (1970) for the Merce Cunningham

21. See Kenneth Silverman’s biography of Cage, Begin Again, and Carolyn Brown’s memoir of her time with Cage and Cunningham, Chance and Circumstance.
22. Cage, Selected Letters.
Dance Company. With Cage’s encouragement and assistance, Cunningham used Satie’s music for choreographic celebrations of “Eros” and “the seeing of things hidden to everything but the personal, the individual imagination, and the wooing of these to human touch,” the thematic inverse of their critiques of socially acceptable but unfulfilling marriages. Satie’s music provided relief from creative and personal difficulties before the couple’s later embrace of Zen Buddhism and non-intention, of chance and the I Ching. Cunningham’s long-brewing choreography to Socrate began with his solo to Cage’s performance of the first movement of the work as a piano solo in 1944. Cunningham did not complete his Socrate project, however, until twenty-five years later, in 1969 (premiered January 1970), when he choreographed a duo for the second movement and an ensemble dance for the third. When the publisher of Socrate, Max Eschig, refused rights for the performance of the dance to Cage’s two-piano arrangement, Cage came to the rescue with Cheap Imitation, an I Ching-derived, monophonic recomposition of Socrate for piano solo that maintains Satie’s rhythms. Unlike Cunningham’s other choreographies from the 1950s to his death, his Satie dances are set and danced to their accompanying music. Second Hand, as I will show, dramatizes not only the Socratic texts set in Satie’s score but also the Cage-Cunningham partnership. In the history I trace here, Second Hand is a retrospective acknowledgment of the couple’s earlier dependence on and subsequent rejection of personal expression, a rejection that highlighted the autonomy of their work and cemented their canonical status within the avant-garde. In all of his collaborations with Cunningham, and especially in the early dances and Satie dances, one finds Cage the pragmatist dealing with matters of counts and timing for dancers, not Cage the idealist dealing with abstract aesthetics. Instead of dismissing these collaborations as “early” or “anomalous,” I suggest that they are fundamental to understanding how Cage and Cunningham’s early relationship, prior to their de facto marriage, led to one of the most productive divorces in the history of dance and music.

Irreconcilable Differences: Credo in Us: A Suburban Idyll (1942), The Perilous Night (1943–44), and Four Walls (1944)

The roots of this divorce of music and dance are to be found in the first Cage-Cunningham collaborations from the early 1940s, when the men became lovers. The works they produced during this early period were not

23. This is the description of Cunningham’s Idyllic Song that was printed in early programs; see Vaughan, Merce Cunningham, 34. Cunningham used the word “Eros” to describe the concerns of both Septet, his 1953 choreography to Satie’s Trois morceaux en forme de poire, and his eponymous choreography to the same composer’s Nocturnes; see Vaughan, Merce Cunningham, 76, and Cunningham and Lesschaeve, Dancer and the Dance, 92.
only self-expressive (as several writers have inferred from the dances’ titles and the artists’ vague, sometimes cryptic, remarks); they were also critiques of sexually unsatisfying heterosexual marriages, as becomes clear as soon as we delve into hitherto unexamined archival materials. Cage and Cunningham found a precedent for the presentation of such content in the works of Martha Graham, in whose company Cunningham danced from 1939 to 1946. This content had more immediate personal relevance, I will suggest, given Cage’s increased creative and sexual involvement with Cunningham and his growing distance, separation, and eventual divorce from his then wife, Xenia Kashevaroff Cage.24

In 1938, Cunningham, then a student at the Cornish School in Seattle, was struck by the sharp red corduroy coat of the school’s newly hired dance accompanist, John Cage.25 Cunningham played alongside Xenia Cage and other Cornish students in Cage’s percussion group. At Cornish, Cage first composed for prepared piano to accompany Syvilla Fort’s solo dance Bacchanale.26 Though Cunningham left the West Coast in 1939 to take up Martha Graham’s offer to dance with her company in New York, he and Cage kept in contact.27 Cage and Cunningham also spent time together in March 1942, when Graham’s company was performing in Chicago. In a letter to Cunningham written later in the month, Cage begins a refrain that he would continue over the next three years: “And you were marvelous. . . . Nobody liked Eric [sic, Erick Hawkins, Graham’s favored male dancer, with whom she was in love]. I was overjoyed that the audience was so spontaneous every time you left the stage. And I was amazed that the reviews didn’t headline your work. But they didn’t. Nobody recognizes Nijinsky when they see him.”28 Cage goes on to introduce the possibility of their first collaboration, an engagement at the Arts Club of Chicago for Cunningham and Jean Erdman, another dancer in Graham’s company who, like Cunningham, felt

24. The fullest history thus far published on the early relationship between Cage and Cunningham can be found in Silverman, Begin Again. On Cage’s life and work before meeting Cunningham in 1938, see also Hines, “‘Then Not Yet ‘Cage,’” and Miller, “Henry Cowell and John Cage.”

25. Close to the very end of Caplan, Cage/Cunningham: A Film (01:23:20), in an especially unguarded tone, Cage recalls Cunningham noticing his “red corduroy coat” and then asking other dancers who he was.

26. See Levitz, “Syvilla Fort’s Africanist Modernism.”

27. In a letter dated October 26, 1941, sent from Chicago to Doris Dennison, a Cornish dance accompanist and instructor of Eurythmics who had also been a member of his percussion group, Cage writes that Martha Graham had written to Cunningham and expressed an interest in working with Cage in New York: Cage, Selected Letters, 53–54. Doris Dennison did not live openly with her female partner until much later in her life, but she has suggested, in an interview with Janice Ross, that in their earlier years Cage and Cunningham were more open about their relationship when in the company of other gay couples: Janice Ross, e-mail correspondence with the author, August 11, 2014.

she was not making full use of her gifts. Cage writes that Rue Shaw, president of the Arts Club, thought that the Cunningham-Erdman performance should have as its accompaniment “not piano music because everybody no longer likes typical dance concert music.” Cage would more than oblige. *Credo in Us*, the very first Cage-Cunningham collaboration (with Jean Erdman co-choreographing and also performing), was anything but “typical dance concert music.” Cage produced a score for four musicians that calls for either radio or phonograph, piano, electric buzzer, and percussion including tin cans, gongs, and tom-toms.

Throughout the dance Cunningham and Erdman also recited the text of a libretto penned by Cunningham. Scholars of both music and dance have had little to say about this text, apart from noting the vague Joycean ring to the fragment of it that was published in the book *Merce Cunningham* by longtime Cunningham archivist and friend David Vaughan. But co-choreographer Jean Erdman’s recollection of the dance in an interview suggests a more specific meaning: “[It] was based on a script that Merce had written, but he didn’t want anyone in the world to know he’d ever written anything, so we just pretended we’d gotten it out of a French magazine and translated it . . . ! It was a kind of criticism of our own bourgeois backgrounds—the parents having a little too much trouble, or something. . . . The script is the secret.” A poetic synopsis of the script that was printed in the premiere program began,

> They are happied husband and wifed. They have harmonious postures. They facade their frappant ways across a sacred spot. Ah, but what! This breakage of pattern. And he on-and-ons—is he only machine?—with her unreality. But soon breakage too. So he searched for the Glory that was Greeley’s, and she wondered after. It killed time.31

29. Ibid., 57–58. This correspondence reveals that Cage had proposed working on what would become *Credo* before moving in with Jean Erdman and Joseph Campbell in New York in the summer of 1942, having been thrown out of Peggy Guggenheim’s house for arranging a future concert at the Museum of Modern Art rather than at Guggenheim’s own Art of This Century gallery. (The Guggenheim debacle was a favorite story of Cage’s, as it allowed him to recount that, as he packed up and moved out of Guggenheim’s place, the avuncular, pipe-smoking Marcel Duchamp comforted him and assured him that all would be OK.) Perhaps forgetting that he had already proposed his own percussion music as dance accompaniment to Cunningham earlier that March, Cage would later mistakenly recall that in place of rent Erdman asked him for dance music for her summer performances with Cunningham at Bennington College. See Silverman, *Begin Again*, 51–52. The most complete history of *Credo in Us* is found in G. Paul Cox’s dissertation on the work, “Collaged Codes: John Cage’s *Credo in Us***.”


31. The program for the premiere, which took place at Bennington College on August 1, 1942, can be found in the Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation Inc. Records, (S) *MGZMD 196, Box 49, Folder 2*, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, NYPLPA.
Unnoticed in the Cage-Cunningham literature is the possibility that the “Glory that was Greeley’s” refers not to Horace Greeley but to Greeley, Colorado, where Cage’s paternal grandfather, Gustavus Adolphus Williamson Cage, settled as a missionary preacher after much travel throughout the country. In addition to grandfather Cage’s travels in the name of God, Cage and his mother were constantly forced to move by Cage’s father, John Milton Cage Sr., as a result of the lack of job security that accompanies the occupation of “inventor.” That Cage’s own wife, Xenia, followed her husband as he crisscrossed the country in 1942 lay just beneath the surface of Cunningham’s script. Cunningham and Erdman, whose characters were listed in the program as “Husband–Shadow” and “Wife–Ghoul’s Rage” respectively, were likely dancing a troubled marriage modeled on those of three generations of Cages. This, at any rate, would explain why Cunningham designates the time of the dance as occurring specifically over “Three Generations.”

Cage has said of Credo in Us (and so, by extension, of Cunningham’s dance and script for it) that it is “a kind of satire on America.” He was then asked if the ‘Us’ is the U.S.” Instead of explicitly denying the possibility, he stated, “it’s also you and me... that we believe in all that.” In the same interview with Charles Amirkhanian in 1983, Cage notes that “there are many holes in the music, and in the holes there were words of a text that Merce Cunningham had written.”

John Cage’s autograph score for Credo in Us contains some of those “words of a text that Merce Cunningham had written.” These brief excerpts of the script are found throughout the score, in which they act as cues for the musicians. They designate where unmeasured rests (notated as whole-measure rests with fermatas) were to end. Though brief, these cues reveal much about the theme of Cunningham’s script. Take, for example, “But Credo in us was Ghoul’s Rage motto and la vie bid them well to use it.” Cunningham depicted “Ghoul’s Rage,” the wife, as the more active and malevolent half of the couple. She is both nagging shrew and domineering harpy, as revealed by both the character’s name and photographs of Erdmann’s portrayal of her (see Figure 1).

The representation is clearly misogynistic and suggests that Cunningham fell into a “blame the wife” mentality when thinking about the Cages’ marital strife. At the same time, Cunningham’s cue points to “la vie,” the bourgeois conventions of American society, as the ultimate root of the problem—the demand heeded by Ghoul’s Rage to maintain the appearance of a happy heterosexual marriage at all costs. Cage’s score calls for recordings of concert music by canonical composers. On page 19 of the manuscript score, Cage

32. The setting was designated as “Three Generations” in the program for the premiere; see ibid.
33. Kostelanetz, Converging with Cage, 62.
34. The autograph score is held in the John Cage Music Manuscript Collection, JPB 94-24 (originals), Folder 69, Music Division, NYPLA.
reiterates parenthetically what he would like played on the phonograph: “Beethoven, Sibelius, Shostakovich, or whatever.” That very dismissive grouping of widely performed composers with “whatever” suggests his alignment of over-heard music with “la vie”: the status quo and the trials of an unnecessary and unhappy marriage. The work’s title (“I believe in us”) is sarcastic, representing the delusional motto of Ghoul’s Rage.35 That Credo in Us critiques the ideal of heterosexual domestic bliss is borne out by the sardonic subtitle that Cunningham and Erdman included in programs for the dance’s two subsequent performances: “A Suburban Idyll.” Following performances of Credo at Bennington College in August 1942 and then in Chicago in February 1943, Cage and Cunningham saw more of

35. Here I part ways with the interpretation of Jonathan Katz, who understands the “us” of Credo in Us to refer to Cage and Cunningham themselves and therefore to be a public acknowledgment of their relationship: “Its title is the first acknowledgment of the personal and professional partnership that animated so much of their subsequent work. Although they had been involved with one another for nearly four years, Credo in Us, born of their new independent life together, marked the public emergence of the relationship as muse”: Katz, “John Cage’s Queer Silence,” 42.
each other. In a letter to Cunningham postmarked June 28, 1943, Cage begins, “Saturday night nearly went crazy, because, not solving my problems until they occur, I very suddenly realized you were gone.”\(^{36}\) In the same letter, he admits, “I say I’m unsentimental but I’m sitting at one of our tables and looking in a mirror where you often were” and writes of “this gravity elastic feeling to let go and fall together with you.”\(^{37}\) In a letter postmarked the very next day, June 29, 1943, Cage writes, “I think of you all the time,” and, using their code names for their penises, “thought about enigma and his little friend.”\(^{38}\) Then in early 1944 he writes,

> i love you always.

> beauty.

> i am in a muddled state.

> calliope calls.

> soul-searching; i did it once before, about 12 years ago. i’m not very good at it.\(^{39}\)

Cage’s desire to be with Cunningham becomes the impetus not only for reevaluating his marriage but also for making his art: Cage writes that “calliope [the chief Muse] calls” upon him to pen works just as he is “soul-searching” and figuring out his personal relationships. Commentators have previously noted that the titles of and brief program notes for many of the works that Cage composed in 1944 suggest a relationship under stress: *The Perilous Night*, *Tossed as It Is Untroubled*, *Root of an Unfocus*, *A Valentine Out of Season*. While it might seem reductive to read music as a *roman à clef*, Cage’s newly available correspondence taken together with the programmatic content of and references in his music of 1944 now conclusively demonstrates that he expressed the difficulties of his love life in his compositions, even in purely instrumental works such as *The Perilous Night*.

Cage premiered *The Perilous Night* at the couple’s first duo concert-recital. Dancing his own choreographed solos and sharing the stage with no one apart from Cage, Cunningham has stated that he dates “my beginning” from this performance in New York City on April 5, 1944, at 9 p.m. on the stage of the Humphrey-Weidman Studio Theatre at 108 West Sixteenth Street.\(^{40}\) The concert was clearly a carefully prepared event, from the invitation list (a who’s who of critics, artists, and musicians) to the single-sided rectangular cardstock
program, designed by Cage, the epitome of sharp, sans-serif simplicity. The concert was in three parts—dance, music, dance—separated by two intermissions. First were three Cunningham dances, *Triple-Paced*, *Root of an Unfocus*, and *Tossed as It Is Untroubled*, all to scores composed by Cage, the first two of which bore the same titles while the last was at that point titled *Meditation*. (Cage later changed the title to match that of the dance.) There were then further compositions by Cage: *The Perilous Night*, songs (“She Is Asleep” and “The Wonderful Widow of 18 Springs”), and *Amores*. The concert concluded with three more Cunningham-Cage collaborations: *The Unavailable Memory of . . ., Totem Ancestor, and Spontaneous Earth*.41

Cage began work on *The Perilous Night* for prepared piano, the earliest of his darker self-expressive “soul-searching” works (*Tossed as It Is Untroubled, Root of an Unfocus*, and *A Valentine Out of Season*), near the end of 1943, and finished it early in 1944.42 In a lecture at Vassar College in 1948 he first publicly stated that “The Perilous Night concerned the loneliness and terror that comes to one when love becomes unhappy.”43 Scholars of Cage and Jasper Johns, who painted a series of paintings on *The Perilous Night* in the 1980s, most often cite a statement made by Cage in conversation with art critic and curator Richard Francis at a comfortable distance of forty-five years from the piece’s composition and the deterioration of his marriage. Francis recorded, “John Cage has referred to the ‘perilous night’ as a particularly dark period in his own life. He says that the image came from an Irish folk tale which he remembers in a collection made by Joseph Campbell. For him, the music tells a story of the dangers of the erotic life and describes the misery of ‘something that was together that is split apart.’”44 Cage does not mention his marital issues and budding relationship with Cunningham directly here. Instead, he yokes them to, not exactly “an Irish folk tale,” as he says, but one or two stories drawn from the Lancelot and Grail writings of Chrétien de Troyes and Wolfram von Eschenbach. Cage learned these stories from Joseph

41. *Triple-Paced, Root of an Unfocus, Tossed as It Is Untroubled, The Perilous Night, The Unavailable Memory of . . ., Totem Ancestor, and Spontaneous Earth* were all for prepared piano solo, and played by Cage. Of the two songs performed, the second movement of “She Is Asleep” was for voice and prepared piano. (The first movement, for percussion, was not performed at the concert.) “The Wonderful Widow of 18 Springs” was for voice and “closed piano” (i.e., with the keyboard lid down), the pianist, here Cage, using his hands to drum, tap, and knock the piano. Juanita Hall sang both of these. (Today, Hall is best remembered for creating the role of Bloody Mary in *South Pacific*, for which she became the first African American to win a Tony.) *Amores* was for prepared piano and three percussionists (Robert Fizdale, Karl Kritz, and Stanley Lock at this performance).

42. At the end of the autograph manuscript Cage wrote, “New York City / Winter 1943–44”. John Cage Music Manuscript Collection, JPB 94-24 (originals), Folder 111, Music Division, NYPLA.

43. The lecture was published as “A Composer’s Confessions” in *John Cage, Writer*, 40.

Campbell, Jean Erdman’s husband, who in 1943 likely told him that their origins were in the Celtic oral tradition, which explains Cage’s reference to “an Irish folk tale.” In 1943 Campbell was editing mythologies collected by Heinrich Zimmer, with whom Campbell consulted before Zimmer’s “sudden death, in the spring of 1943.”

Both stories to which Cage refers as an “Irish folk tale” contain “a certain perilous bed, Liz de la Mervoille, ‘The Marvel Bed’—no pleasant piece of furniture.” In the first story in the Zimmer collection, the bed upon which the knight Gawain lies in the Château Merveil (Marvel Castle) flies to and fro across the room. It is pelted with hail. A lion enters. By surviving a one-night stay at the Château Merveil, Gawain “had satisfied and quelled, at last, the recalcitrant feminine element of the castle.” The second possible source story involving a “marvel bed” or “perilous bed” tells of Gawain and Lancelot sharing a bedroom with three beds, the most inviting one of which they are forbidden to lie upon “by the directing damsel” of the house. Of course Lancelot undresses and lies on that very bed, and barely escapes being pierced by a falling flaming lance that sets the bed on fire. On the very next page the reader learns that on the following day, Lancelot, now on his own, has met another damsel willing to house him. Tonight his accommodations come with yet another condition: he must share a bed with this woman, who demands that he make love to her. They lie in bed together in their underclothes, but as Lancelot remains unresponsive the woman leaves him, because she understands that “he had on hand a more perilous and grave affair than any ever undertaken by a knight.”

In these tales that inspired one of Cage’s earliest and most acclaimed pieces for prepared piano (and one not serving as dance accompaniment), it is the sexual demands of a...
female partner that challenge the male protagonist.\textsuperscript{50} If Cage’s references to these stories are considered together with his personal history, it becomes clear how deeply he incorporated his life into his work at this time. Some critics appeared to misunderstand the composer’s expressive intentions, and this bruised his ego.\textsuperscript{51} Cage was presenting new music and, quietly, a new part of himself at the couple’s duo debut concert on April 5, 1944.

Also composed at this time but not performed at the 1944 duo recital, \textit{A Valentine Out of Season} was a work for prepared piano that struck a chord with Xenia Kaschevaroff Cage. As Cage biographer Kenneth Silverman speculates, “seemingly as a peace offering, [Cage] dedicated to Xenia a short, melancholy piece meaningfully titled \textit{A Valentine out of season}. But although he called every day, Xenia said, she repelled his continued efforts to revive their relationship.”\textsuperscript{52} Silverman’s account relies mostly on Xenia’s letters to others. A missive from Xenia to John, however, reveals that she knew where to reach him—at Cunningham’s. The choreographer’s spartan studio had a makeshift dance-floor-cum-mattress, potbelly stove, and not much else—loft living before it was in vogue.\textsuperscript{53} On February 12 Xenia mailed John an envelope containing a perhaps ironic but painstakingly intricate valentine (see Figure 2). This valentine, which to my knowledge has never been mentioned in print, plays on the idea of “heartstrings,” here “prepared”

\textsuperscript{50} Xenia soon understood Cage’s preference for Cunningham as indicative of her husband’s homosexuality. In a letter to her friend Ed Ricketts dated August 25, 1945, speaking about Flato, a new lover with whom she was infatuated and who had just moved to San Francisco, Xenia noted, “I miss [Flato] every second. I’m scared. I’ve seen him three times. He is no homosexual. Not even Ambidextrous”: Edward Flanders Ricketts Papers, M0291, Box 9, Folder 15, Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries. “Flato,” Xenia’s unquestionable heterosexual, most likely refers to Charles Flato, who worked for, among other US federal agencies, the Board of Economic Warfare, during which time he provided intelligence to the KGB, before moving to San Francisco in July 1945; see Haynes, \textit{Venona}, 118–21.

\textsuperscript{51} Several commentators (the first being Revill, \textit{Roaring Silence}, 88–89) have quoted Calvin Tomkins’s recollection of a conversation with Cage regarding audiences’ and critics’ misprision of his expressive intent: \textit{“The Perilous Night} suite . . . was concerned with ‘the loneliness and terror that comes to one when love becomes unhappy.’ To a good many listeners, though, the effect was rather different. When a critic wrote, for example, that the last movement of \textit{The Perilous Night} sounded like ‘a woodpecker in a church belfry,’ Cage was genuinely dismayed. ‘I had poured a great deal of emotion into the piece, and obviously I wasn’t communicating this at all.’ . . . Along with these feelings of uncertainty about his ability to express anything musically, Cage was undergoing severe strains in his personal life. He and Xenia separated in 1945”: Tomkins, \textit{Bride and the Bachelors}, 97.

\textsuperscript{52} Silverman, \textit{Begin Again}, 62. As first noted by Patterson, the composer’s copy of the score indicated “Music for Xenia to play on a prepared grand piano”: Patterson, “Appraising the Catchwords,” 277.

\textsuperscript{53} Although Christian Wolff never entered Cunningham’s East Seventeenth Street apartment, he took piano lessons with Grete Sultan in the unit below him. He remembers that the building was fairly run down, the units narrow but long, “not like lofts in Soho”: Christian Wolff, conversation with the author, February 26, 2017. Wolff’s recollections of this time are now published: Wolff, “About Merce.”
by Cupid’s arrow. It is not clear whether Xenia offered the valentine to John as a show of affection or a rebuke. What is clear, in large black letters on the outermost envelope, is that it is addressed to John Cage at 12 East Seventeenth Street—the address of Merce Cunningham’s loft, where Cage was temporarily living from at least July 1944.54

Figure 2  Xenia Kashevaroff Cage, valentine for John Cage, February 1945, paper and string. Photograph by the author. Used by permission. This figure appears in color in the online version of the Journal.

54. The envelope containing the valentine is found in “Correspondence from Xenia Cage to John Cage, Feb. 1945,” John Cage Correspondence, Box 4, Folder 7, Sleeve 5, John Cage Collection, Music Library, Northwestern University Library. Cage would not move into his studio loft on the Lower East Side at 326 Monroe until 1946.
Between their duo debut recital in April 1944 and Cunningham’s solo recital (with Cage as one of two accompanists) in New York in January 1945 (just a month before Xenia’s valentine), the couple collaborated on two other works, *Four Walls* (premiered August 22, 1944) and *Idyllic Song* (premiered November 20, 1944), the latter of which was choreographed and danced to Cage’s solo piano performance of the first movement of Satie’s *Socrate*. These two works differ from one another in terms of the affect and intended meaning of music, choreography, and topic more than any other two collaborations produced by the couple at this time. *Four Walls* was a dance-drama to a script by Cunningham about a troubled family. The opening stage directions state, “One should feel the rigid pattern of a family set by years of time, particularly in the parents, and the complete subservience to it. . . . The Boy (Cunningham) is completely away from it inwardly. . . . The Girl (Julie Harris [then eighteen years old]) fights it inwardly and outwardly.”55 While these directions provide a glimpse of staid and conventional family life, the script for *Four Walls*, previously considered lost, reveals just how preoccupied Cunningham was at this time with condemning the sexual repression of those who couple for propriety rather than passion.56

Though at times expressed in slippery Joycean language, the indictment of repressed sexuality in the script for *Four Walls* is even stronger and clearer than in *Credo in Us*. The characters of Mother and Father are delighted that their daughter’s hand is being sought by an upright and successful man. This man’s character is referred to as “Lover” in the script, but his tendency toward physical inaction does not support that designation as far as the Girl, the daughter, is concerned. She is turned off by him. She desires not a husband and father of children, but rather, as many of her lines make clear, a lover who will satisfy her sexually: “I ache for tousled legs and lobes,” “Oh, if only he were a one to grab my arms and legs.”57 She protests to the unresponsive Lover, “You have given me no reason to be alive— / You have left me with a ring to place upon a hollow hand,” and, “You will insist for propriety / for all the things that quide [sic] your world.” Her brother, the character designated “Boy,” is the only one who understands her. He tells the Lover that his sister might be looking for something more physical and exciting. The Lover thinks he understands, but it is too late: at their next meeting the Girl kills him. There is an undeniable thread of misogyny that runs from the script for *Credo in Us*, through the myths that inspired Cage’s *The Perilous Night*, to the Girl’s murder of her sexually undemonstrative suitor in *Four Walls*. In

56. The script was shared with me by David Vaughan of the Merce Cunningham Archive, Cunningham Dance Foundation, New York, in 2009. If it has since been transferred to the NYPLPA, it remains unprocessed at the time of writing.
57. Cunningham, script for *Four Walls*, 2, 5, 6.
Four Walls, however, the Girl’s sexuality is presented not simply as what makes her a murderous virago but as what leads her to be true to her own sexual desires in the face of socially imposed repression.

The Boy understands his sister’s desires and her defiance of propriety, and is clearly in agreement with her. At various points throughout the dance-drama a chorus of six Nearpeople and a chorus of six Mad Ones appear. The six Nearpeople speak in unison, their nattering suggesting middle-class groupthink. Their increasing discomfort with the house and their finger-pointing reveals their (ultimately unsuccessful) paranoid policing of those who ignore convention. The Mad Ones, who inhabit what the script refers to as “transparent time,” appear when the family order is broken, most notably when the Girl kills the man who wishes to marry her. The Mad Ones do not speak; they dance, wildly, with the Boy. Just as the Girl seems to be inspired by them during the murder, the Boy seems to speak for them in two of his soliloquies. In one of these the Boy denounces the Nearpeople both for mindlessly “breeding” and for gossiping about the lives of those who are different from them:

what fantasies of fakes they are—
breeding forever like mosquitoes, delving forever into others.
what to find, and how to say it.
the witch-brewers.
the only evil,
the only truly evil ones we know.59

In another soliloquy, which occurs at the conclusion of the dance-drama, the Boy invites a number of fantastical personages, both male and female, to possess him:

Enter all the mad ones of my soul in silent svelted cheap array—
enter zuerdon, beaded by a lead-fire.
enter magdoreed, beset by snares from oldenor-enter gifts of porden-fire, ampheed-water, air of bround, malkin line, brought by memories-in-skin.
the lady bountiful-of-sin,
the lady gatherer-of-poison-love,
the lady mad-by-blindman’s-touch,
the lady queen-in-sodden-silk,
enter saggrined mellow eaten souls, turn my fury into flames, take wing and lead me to the mad-view.
this earthfakescene is worse than shamming god.60

58. Ibid., 8.
59. Ibid., 10.
60. Ibid., 12.
Cunningham’s script not only lambastes sexually unfulfilling relationships but also celebrates the myriad gender/sexual identifications of those who do not fit into “this earthfakescene,” of those who take the “mad-view” instead of heeding the demands of compulsory heterosexuality and traditional family values.

It is clear from Cage’s music for *Four Walls* that he was in possession of a copy of Cunningham’s script (or at least, a very detailed outline) when he composed the easy-to-play, white-keys piano score for the then unknown accompanist at the Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts Camp in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where Cunningham would be in residence without Cage in the summer of 1944. The puritanical Nearpeople, for example, are accompanied by a mindless melody in a square rhythm in piano octaves at the outer registers of the keyboard (see Example 1). This music, which features at the first appearance of the Nearpeople in act 1, scene 4, occurs again in act 2, scene 9. (Cunningham’s scene numbers run continuously across acts 1 and 2; thus, scene 9 is the first scene of act 2.) The widely spaced octaves together with the upbeat rests create a hollow sound that mirrors the inanity of these gossipy neighbors. This is in stark contrast to the music for the Boy’s dance with the Mad Ones (see Example 2). Here Cage’s music captures the driving and restless physicality of these characters who resist the sexual conformity for which Cunningham’s script shows such contempt.

Noticing the repetitive music (such as that for the ensemble dances) and the longer silences (for spoken monologues) but unaware of the details of the script, some commentators have tried to fit *Four Walls* in a rather procrustean manner, into Cage’s development toward 4′33″ and a larger history of musical minimalism. Taking a more historically focused approach, Cage scholars understand *Four Walls* to be based on Cage’s compositional technique of “rhythmic structure,” the term he used to describe his compositions at this time. Given that both Cunningham and Cage used this term to describe not only the organization of but also the correspondence between

61. The pianist was Drusa Wilker, an especially experienced and respected accompanist for dance; see “Interview with Merce Cunningham [by David Vaughan], June 13 and 16, 1978,” audio recording, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, NYPLA.
62. Examples from *Four Walls* are derived from Cage, *Four Walls*.
63. The music for the Boy’s dance was also used for Cunningham’s later solo *Soliloquy*.
64. This trend started with Margaret Leng Tan’s liner notes to her recording of the work: “*Four Walls* embodies John Cage’s seminal ideas on silence, repetition and processes of gradual change and is an uncanny prophecy of Minimalism. . . . [T]he silences in *Four Walls* will invite the sounds of the environment in which the recording is being heard to enter into the composition and into the listening experience. Seen in this light, *Four Walls* becomes an antecedent to 4′33″.” Tan, liner notes to John Cage: *The Perilous Night.* The trend has continued, especially among Cage fans: “Minimalism may have been a ’60s movement, but Cage wrote some of its classics in the ’40s (*Four Walls*)”: Gann, “Philosopher No More,” 295.
Example 1  Cage, *Four Walls*, act 1, scene 4, mm. 30–55. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the *Journal*.
music and dance, it merits brief clarification here.\textsuperscript{65} Understood broadly, Cage’s “rhythmic structure” simply refers to the division of a piece into

\textsuperscript{65} A clear introduction to Cage’s “rhythmic structure,” and the one most pertinent to the present discussion, in that the author shows how in Cage’s works for dance it allowed choreographers freedom between “structural guideposts,” is found in Miller, “Cage’s Collaborations,” 154–59, here 156. For an introduction to “rhythmic structure” considered separately from its use in Cunningham’s dances, see Pritchett, \textit{Music of John Cage}, 13–22, and for a more sustained examination of Cage’s rhythmic structure, see Emmerik, “Imaginary Grid.”
sections (some writers use the term “periods”) of so many measures, such sections often being clearly signaled by double bar lines. *Spontaneous Earth,* for example, Cage’s prepared piano piece for Cunningham’s solo of that name, has nine sections of nine measures each. When an example of rhythmic structure has a squared “micro-macrocosmic” relationship of this sort, Cage would also sometimes refer to its “square root.”66 The first four movements of *The Perilous Night* are composed this way: 10 × 10, 6 × 6, 12 × 12, and 7 × 7, respectively. The micro-macrocosmic relationship can be even more elegant, as in the textbook example of Cage’s *First Construction in Metal* (1939), which contains 16 sections of 16 measures, the 16 sections falling into groups of 4, 3, 2, 3, and 4 sections, and, mirroring this, each 16-measure section dividing into groups of 4, 3, 2, 3, and 4 measures.67 For Cage, as is often repeated, such a division based on duration rather than harmonic development freed music, in that it allowed more varied sounds (those of his prepared piano, those of “silence”) to play their role in a well-structured composition. Cage found—imagined, really—a precedent for this in the music of Satie.68 In his traditionalist-baiting, heretical lecture “Defense of Satie,” given at Black Mountain College in 1948, Cage dismissed Beethoven and praised Satie on account of the latter’s focus on structuring music by time: “into Satie’s continuity come folk tunes, musical clichés, and absurdities of all kinds; he is not ashamed to welcome them in the house he builds: Its structure is strong.”69 Far beyond providing justification for his own compositions, Cage reaches a rather dramatic conclusion in his Satie lecture: “Good music can act as a guide to good living.”70

66. While many writers refer to Cage’s “square root form,” the composer appears to have hardly ever used this exact term in his writings, even though he does sometimes refer to a “square root” when discussing his “micro-macrocosmic” principle, as in his “Composer’s Confessions,” 35. In his infamous “Lecture on Nothing” he notes that “[s]ubdivision involving a square root is the only possible subdivision which permits this micro-macrocosmic rhythmic structure which I find so acceptable and accepting”: Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” 112. It was not Cage but Lou Harrison who made popular the phrase “square root form,” which he refers to as “Mr. Cage’s Square Root Form” in his *Music Primer*, 10.

67. This is by far the most discussed use of rhythmic structure in the Cage literature. See, for example, Miller, “Henry Cowell and John Cage,” 79, and Pritchett, *Music of John Cage*, 16–19.

68. Jeffrey Perry discusses rhythmic structure and shows how Cage cherry-picked from Satie’s music to create a model for his own in “A Quiet Corner Where We Can Talk.” In his “Defense of Satie” Cage finds an apparently rather random “structure” in Satie’s “Muscular Fantasy” (the third movement of *Choses vues à droite et à gauche*): “The Muscular Fantasy has a structure that is a play on the numbers 4, 2, and 3 in the following way: three 4’s are followed by one 2, four 4’s are followed by two 3’s; a humorous cadenza is followed by one 4 and one 1, and one 3, followed also by one 1, serves to end the piece”: Cage, “Defense of Satie,” 83.


70. Ibid., 84. He also concludes that “rhythmic structure, traditional to the Orient,” acts as a solution to “harmonic structure,” which first developed and then was questioned along the same historical trajectory as “Western materialism.”
Less poetically but far more practically, rhythmic structure could be useful when composing for dance: a choreographer could work with so many measures in a certain meter, and then move on to another set of counts at another structural division, which would act, in effect, as a cue point. More often than not, Cage’s compositions are less numerically elegant in their divisions than the works cited above. Cunningham wrote of their early collaboration that Cage “was working in a way he called rhythmic structure, and all of the dances with the exception of Totem Ancestor (1942) were choreographed involving this use of time.”71 He goes on to state that Root of an Unfocuss (1944) “was in three parts, the first section being 8 × 8, the second 10 × 10, and the third 6 × 6.”72 Cunningham remembered this incorrectly: only the first third of Cage’s score follows an obvious rhythmic structure, and it is 7 sections of 7 measures (not 8 × 8), clearly marked by double bar lines. The second and third sections are much less clearly divided.73 Cunningham’s main point is that rhythmic structure allowed them “to work separately, Cage not having to be with the dance except at structural points, and I was free to make the phrases and movements within the phrases vary their speeds and accents without reference to a musical beat, again only using the structural points as identification between us.”74

Totem Ancestor, meanwhile, was indeed not cast in an elegant rhythmic structure from which Cage and Cunningham worked separately. Looking at both the contemporary Labanotation of the score by Lena Belloc as well as viewing multiple reconstructions overseen and coached by Cunningham in his later years, one sees clearly that the score for Totem divides rather neatly into specific sections that correspond to different sections of Cunningham’s choreography.75 Given Cage’s rather capacious understanding of “rhythmic structure,” why not use the term to refer to this score too? From Cunningham’s perspective, it would not be appropriate because the music tracks the movement so closely. Totem Ancestor is a two-minute solo that takes place entirely on a diagonal from upstage left to downstage right.76 The climax occurs about two-thirds of the way through the dance (see Video Example 1 in the online version of the Journal). Cued by the sforzando downbeat of measure 56, at which point the tempo accelerates to \( \delta = 144 \), the soloist drops to the floor in the downstage right corner, alertly looking off into the distance, as if on the prowl. He rises and, across the accelerating sextuplets in measures 60–65, reverses along his diagonal, as if raring to gather energy for

72. Ibid., 139.
73. Miller attempts to parse them in “Cage’s Collaborations,” 156–58.
75. The Labanotation may be seen in Cage, Totem Ancestor (1960).
76. A video recording of a performance of Totem Ancestor by Daniel Madoff at the 16th Fire Island Dance Festival in July 2010 is held by the Merce Cunningham Trust. For Cunningham’s memories and understanding of the dance, see Vaughan, Merce Cunningham, 27–29.
what follows. At measure 66 the piece reaches its fastest tempo, $\dot{\varphi} = 208$, “Con tutta la forza” (see Example 3). For twelve measures, a repeated two-measure pattern is banged out six times, $ffe$, with an accent alternating between beat 3 and beat 2 of each measure. The soloist’s virtuosic diagonal return to the downstage right corner of the stage falls into four-measure phrases across this, his athletic changes of position synchronized to the accents. He falls to his knees on the accented third beat. He hops into a squat on the accented second beat. He jumps into the air with head thrown back, jugular exposed, arms pulled back, and the heels meeting the butt on the next accented third beat (see Figure 3). He lands on the next accented second beat. This is repeated twice. At the conclusion of these twelve measures

Example 3  Cage, Totem Ancestor, mm. 59–79. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the Journal.

*This bar is repeated once more in the published version of 1960.

77. Example 3 is derived from Cage, Totem Ancestor (2004).
there is a dramatic rest. There can be no doubt that Cage’s music was composed to follow Cunningham’s choreography closely. Apparently, such tight choreomusicality is not what Cunningham had in mind when he used the phrase “rhythmic structure.”

While Cunningham’s solos choreographed according to rhythmic structure might not seem as accent-driven as Totem Ancestor, most of those solos
were also only a few minutes long. As a result, the duration between structural cue points would be relatively short, and the dance and music would not seem as divorced as in Cunningham’s mature work. In fact, those structural cue points might be perceived as binding the two arts together. Of *Four Walls*, the longest work Cage had yet composed for dance, Cunningham wrote, “We devised a rhythmic structure that included time-lengths for the script and the dancing, and then he composed the work for the white keys only. The rhythmic structure left me free to work with the dancers and actors in such a way as not to pin the words or all the movements to specific notes, although the structural connections were observed.” Cunningham’s focus on the resulting temporary separations of music and dance within rhythmic structure, on his freedom in choreographing *Four Walls*, is probably overstated. This seems more likely when one considers that both music and dance were working in tandem not only with a specific program (as was also true of Cunningham’s choreography for Cage’s arrangements of Satie’s *Socrate*, discussed below) but also with a spoken text, and were to be performed by a group of student dancers.

Martin Erdmann notes that *Four Walls* is a particularly clear example of Cage’s rhythmic structure. The first act is in thirty-five sections of forty-four measures in 2/2 time at $\frac{d}{2} = 88$, such that each of these thirty-five sections should last exactly one minute. Thus, the first act should last exactly thirty-five minutes. The second act consists of twenty-four sections of sixty measures in 2/2 time at $\frac{d}{2} = 120$. By this calculation the second act should last exactly twenty-four minutes. On the basis of the score as published, then, *Four Walls* should last exactly fifty-nine minutes. Building on Erdmann’s work, Paul van Emmerik notes that “the second act consists of twenty-four periods—not twenty-five as was Erdmann’s assumption.” Yet Erdmann’s mistake is easy to understand if, instead of counting measure by measure, he merely scanned for the notated double bar line that Cage used to designate the end of each section (or “period,” as Van Emmerik refers to them): a double bar line appears just twenty measures into the twenty-second section of the second act. This errant double bar line points to the likelihood that while Cage was preparing the manuscript for publication he cut forty measures of what was once the twenty-second section and twenty measures of what was then the twenty-third section, thereby consolidating these two former sections into the twenty-second section found in the score today. The only extant manuscript score for *Four Walls* in the John Cage Manuscript Collection is not the original score from 1944 but a completely clean score

79. Erdmann, “Untersuchungen zum Gesamtwerk,” 114–19. Erdmann’s discussion of *Four Walls* occurs in a chapter about Cage’s relationship to Satie, a more persuasive connection than those who hear it as proto-minimalism, even if Cage’s correspondence reveals that he discovered *Socrate* only after composing *Four Walls*.
from which Henmar published the work in 1982. The possibility that Cage cut sixty measures before publication seems even more likely when one takes into account that the Perry-Mansfield camp asked Cunningham for a production lasting exactly one hour. Erdmann’s “assumption,” therefore, inadvertently points to the likelihood that there were originally twenty-five sections in the second act, thereby creating a dance-drama with (if performed with a metronome) a duration of exactly one hour rather than the fifty-nine minutes of the published score. Why does this matter? Many today think of Cage as the twentieth-century composer who most famously valorized music’s time element, whether in his philosophical writings or in 4’33”. Yet his earliest concern with duration, as in Four Walls, was not philosophical but practical. In Four Walls, composed four years before his “Defense of Satie,” Cage is less like Satie and more like nineteenth-century ballet “specialist” composers (such as Jean Schneitzhoeffer and Ludwig Minkus, names more familiar to balletomanes than to musicologists). He is composing made-to-measure music for danced scenes and spoken sections that fulfill the demands of the libretto and the hour-long slot offered to Cunningham by the performing arts camp.

Erdmann and Van Emmerik have suggested that works such as Four Walls, in which the relationship between metronome markings and clock time is evident, point forward to Cage’s later compositions in which durations of whole scores and of musical events within them are based on clock time alone. Considering only the score (the only evidence available to him) and the retrospective statements of Cage and Cunningham, Erdmann stresses that the collaboration was one in which the artists worked separately: “For each section there were a certain number of minutes available, and the two artists could work largely independently of each other in their respective domains.” Without access to the then unavailable libretto, Erdmann could not possibly have ascertained just how tight the relationship between score and choreography actually was. His conclusion about the score, therefore, repeats the prevailing scholarly projection of a mature Cage-Cunningham choreomusicality and collaborative method backward onto their early works:

As already shown in the above-cited music, the music behaves within each expressive area in a quasi-statuesque manner; it does not move from the spot, even where its outward movement is the fastest (as in the seventh scene). The expression-curve of the whole piece is not liable to the sequence of details, but is projected onto the large form. This concept does not allow direct engagement

81. Nineteenth-century ballet “specialist” composers, as scholars often refer to them, composed at the order and (often changing) pleasure of the ballet master. An overview of the specialist composer’s duties is provided at the outset of Wiley, Tchaikovsky’s Ballets, 1–10. For an introduction to the music of nineteenth-century ballet composers, see Smith, “Orchestra as Translator.”

with spoken and danced stage events: a function of the music that corresponds
in detail to those events is obviously not intended. Formulated positively, this
means that the music is again an ameublement to the other media, as in Socrate
(both the original and the arrangement) and the other Satie pieces mentioned,
for example USPUD.83

It is true that the musical development and expression in any given section of
Four Walls (to take an example from Erdmann, “the threateningly violent
power of the conclusion”)84 might not be especially dynamic in itself. The
dance and the spoken text, however, would still have cued from specific musi-
cal events. Furthermore, the dance could have been and likely was synchro-
nized in rhythm with whole passages: though a serious dance camp with
major figures in attendance, these were student performers (including a young
Julie Harris), a far cry from the professional, less cue-dependent Merce Cunn-
ingham Dance Company of later decades. Although some parts of the script
were spoken over the music, it does not follow that the music was unrespon-
sive to Cunningham’s script. Finally, the many longer tacets throughout the
score would have been filled with lines spoken by characters in a drama about
the fatal consequences of repressing one’s sexuality. 4′33” this was not.

Whereas Cage’s manuscript score for Credo in Us reveals where unmea-
sured rests would end with spoken cues, in Four Walls lines and actions in
the script would sometimes fall within a larger rest and sometimes run over
the music. In some cases the location of specific lines and actions is quite ob-
vious from a comparison of score and script. Following the Girl’s song just
before the murder at the conclusion of act 1, for example, one can be fairly
certain that within the minute-long rest at the beginning of Cage’s section 8
the Lover states his final line, follows the Girl, and is killed off stage. In the
first scene of act 2 it is clear that the Nearpeople chatter over Cage’s accom-
paniment. In the following scene the Boy would likely have delivered his
brief monologue over the piano sections, the piano’s fortissimo outbursts
perhaps functioning as interjections between the Boy’s condemnations of
the Nearpeople.

Several very brief excerpts from Four Walls were recorded on silent film
by Portia Mansfield, cofounder and codirector with Charlotte Perry of the

83. Ibid., 116–17: "Wie an den Notenzitaten schon zu sehen ist, verhält sich die Musik in-
nerhalb eines jeden Ausdrucksbereiches gleichsam statuarisch, sie bewegt sich nicht von der
Stelle, selbst da nicht, wo die äußere Bewegung am schnellsten ist (wie im VII. Satz, s. o.). Die
Ausdruckskurve des ganzen Stückes haftet nicht an der Abfolge der Details, sondern ist auf die
Großform projiziert. Diese Konzeption erlaubt kein direktes Eingehen auf gesprochene oder ge-
tanzte Bühnenvorgänge: eine im Detail diesen korrespondierende Funktion der Musik ist ganz
offensichtlich nicht intendiert. Positiv formuliert bedeutet dies, daß die Musik wiederum ein
ameublement zu den anderen Medien darstellt, wie im Socrate (sowohl dem Original als auch der
Bearbeitung) und den anderen erwähnten Satie-Stücken wie z. B. USPUD” (my translation).
The reference to “the seventh scene” is to the perpetuo eighth notes and syncopated accents.
84. Ibid., 116: “die bedrohlich-gewaltsame Macht des Schlußteils.”
intensive summer arts camp for which the dance-drama was created. From these excerpts it is clear how different the choreography for the Mad Ones was from that for the Nearpeople. The Mad Ones, six women in long red dresses (the same color as the Girl’s), really move: they lunge, their torsos bent at the waist; their arms, in a kind of off-kilter second position, suggest the manipulation of energy; they kick their legs up high and around. The Nearpeople, by contrast, are dressed in light gray, and keep their hands folded in front of them at the waist like obedient children. Their movement is constricted. At one point each Nearperson moves mainly in her own tight little circle, almost like a box step, only occasionally and very briefly weaving in and out of another Nearperson’s little circle. Throughout they keep their backs straight and their gazes forward, stuck in their ways and not going anywhere. The memorable virtuosic choreography in the work is for the Boy and the Mad Ones, proud outsiders who resist the demands of traditional family. As the Boy, Cunningham choreographed ferociously fast spins for himself, his leg whipping out to the side for extra momentum. Some of these turns were completed with the arms out to the side and the upper back arched so that the head and chest face skyward. The suggestion is that he is receiving or comming with “the mad ones of my soul,” as he declares in the script. This arch of the upper back—the body part whose articulation would later become the hallmark of Cunningham’s choreography and the focal point of “Cunningham technique”—here represents a turn away from everyday repression and toward self-liberation.

Four Walls was performed only once, at the Perry-Mansfield camp. But Cunningham took some of his choreographic material as the resisting Boy and re-formed it into a solo dance titled Soliloquy, which premiered at his second solo concert in New York in early 1945. At that concert he would also perform his first dance to the music of Satie, which he had premiered the previous November in a solo concert in Richmond, Virginia. As we will see, the expressive concerns of this Satie dance were far removed from the heteronormative family drama of Four Walls and Credo in Us. They were also distanced from the last role Cunningham created and performed for Martha Graham, that of the Revivalist in her Appalachian Spring, for which Cunningham would receive the most enthusiastic reviews of his dancing yet. As in Credo and Four Walls, Cunningham’s star turn in Appalachian Spring would be a dance that damns, now explicitly, a heterosexual couple. It is no coincidence, I will suggest, that the Revivalist’s movement vocabulary is drawn from the Boy’s solo in Four Walls.

85. Portia Mansfield and Charlotte Perry, *Integration of Dance and Drama*, 16 mm film (now digitized), 37 min., MGZHB 6-490, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, NYPLPA. A few excerpts from this film (including most of the Boy’s solo) are included in Caplan, Cage/Cunningham: A Film, 00:17:45–00:18:33.
No More Drama: Cunningham’s Choreography for *Appalachian Spring* (1944) and His Departure from Graham’s Company

Perhaps more than any other score from the 1940s, Aaron Copland’s ballet score *Appalachian Spring* is celebrated for evoking a United States that is wide open, hardy but warm-hearted, and rooted in optimism. It is indelibly associated with “Simple Gifts,” the nineteenth-century Shaker tune that was made so popular by the score and more particularly by the more widely heard 1945 orchestral suite. The music and the ballet participated in the surge of Americana around the Depression and World War II. Like Copland’s earlier ballets *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*, *Appalachian Spring* capitalizes on a national-ist hunger to rally around the ideals of pioneer spirit and simplicity, and the vastness and possibilities of the frontier.86 Copland’s familiar opening, both in the original 1944 version for thirteen instruments (originally titled *Ballet for Martha* and composed long before the dance was choreographed or its theme and scenario finalized) and in the orchestral suite, suggests this openness, with its stacked tonic and dominant chords basking over a low A pedal (see Example 4).87 Far less well known than this opening or the “Simple Gifts” theme and variations is the ten minutes of music that Copland cut both from the published version of the original score and from the orchestral suite, including music that sharply contrasts with the joyful open expanses of sound that surround it. This is the music that immediately follows the presentation of the “Simple Gifts” theme and variations and that would—in the end, once the dance was choreographed and its scenario finalized—accompany the main solo of the character of the Revivalist. Whereas earlier uses of a low sustained A underlined the heights to which the music stacked above it could open, at rehearsal number 71 in the full dance score the music turns ominous and broods in the lower registers (see Example 5).88 The hollowness of the “secco—misterioso” piano and the *col legno* low strings leads us into the most dissonant and dark section of the score, in which melody is forsaken for the repetitive rumble of driving rhythmic figures. This section sounds more like the furious act 1 Dance in Cage’s *Four Walls* than it does the rest of *Appalachian Spring*. Copland likely cut this section from the published version of the score and the orchestral suite because of its jarring contrast with the rest of the music and because its repetitive figures might not hold much interest without the dancing they were meant to accompany.89

87. Example 4 is derived from Copland, *Appalachian Spring*.
88. Examples 5 and 6 are derived from Copland, *Appalachian Spring* (full dance score).
89. The preface to the published score of the suite, in both orchestral and chamber versions, notes that it “is a condensed version of the ballet . . . retain[ing] all essential features but omit [ting] those sections in which the interest is primarily choreographic”: Copland, *Appalachian Spring: Suite*, preface.
Example 4  Copland, *Appalachian Spring* (original 1944 version for thirteen instruments), opening. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the *Journal*.
Example 4  continued

\[ \text{Fl.} \]
\[ \text{Cl. in Bb} \]
\[ \text{Bb.} \]
\[ \text{Pno.} \]
\[ \text{Vn. I} \]
\[ \text{Vn. II} \]
\[ \text{Va.} \]
\[ \text{Vc.} \]
\[ \text{Db.} \]
Example 5  Copland, *Appalachian Spring* (original 1944 version for thirteen instruments), rehearsals 71 and 72. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the *Journal*.
Example 5 continued
Even less well known than this section of the score is the fact that Cunningham choreographed the Revivalist’s solo in *Appalachian Spring* entirely on his own, a fact that has implications for our understanding of the piece’s complicated gestation and its possible meanings. A number of scholars have
discussed the inclusion in Graham’s earlier draft dance synopses for *Appalachian Spring* of, first, an onstage performance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and, later, characters entirely absent from the ballet as we now know it—a “Fugitive” slave, an “Indian Girl,” and a “Citizen,” who was basically an abolitionist modeled on John Brown. Cunningham would not have known about these scripts, especially since he entered the creation and rehearsal process when it was already well under way:

> [When *Appalachian Spring* came along [in the fall of 1944]—the summer before we worked on it I went to Perry-Mansfield to teach [and to create *Four Walls*], and I wasn’t around while she was doing some of it [at Bennington], but when I came back we started to work, to rehearse, and she said, “I don’t know whether you’re a preacher or a sailor or the devil,” none of which was ever solidified, and she said, “Why don’t you work on it?”
>
> So I and the pianist, Helen Lanièr, worked on it, and I made a dance, and when I had finished it I asked Martha to come and see it. I used a kind of gesture at the end—I thought, she’d talked about a preacher, and I would be a Baptist preacher, and I made a gesture of denouncing somebody, and she looked at all this and she said, “Oh, this is fine, now I know what to do with the rest of the piece.” And I don’t remember her changing that dance.

Extraordinarily, then, this dance of a “preacher” was entirely Cunningham’s creation, not Graham’s. Cunningham’s authorship of it belies interpretations of the preacher as having evolved from Graham’s earlier outlines of the dance.

A more persuasive interpretation of the Revivalist’s solo might be based not on Graham’s discarded scripts but on Cunningham’s choreography and the context of its creation. Cunningham’s solo is distinguished above all by its fervent movement, which is driven by Copland’s score (see Video Example 2.

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92. Cunningham seems to have been consistent in referring to the character as a “preacher”: “The Preacher’s solo in *Appalachian Spring* (1944), I remember making. Graham said, ‘Well, you work at it.’ Then she left the room, so I made the dance”: quoted in Tracy, *Goddess*, 75. A film shot by Ann Barzel containing brief excerpts of *Appalachian Spring*, now held at the Newberry Library in Chicago, is also cataloged with Cunningham’s role listed as “Preacher,” even though all programs consistently listed his role as “Revivalist.” Ann Barzel, *Modern Dance, 1938–1977*, videotape (VHS; now digitized), 49 min., Ann Barzel Dance Film Archive, Ann Barzel Collection, Midwest Dance Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.

93. Marta Robertson writes that “Graham condensed the haunted frenzy of The Fugitive and the fanatical personality of The Abolitionist into the convulsive sermon of The Revivalist”: Robertson, “‘A Gift to Be Simple,’” 222–23. This is cited by Franko, who also writes that “one can see within the Revivalist’s gestures of panic and fear, movement that may have originally been choreographed for the Fugitive”: Franko, *Martha Graham in Love and War*, 58, 57. Neither writer appears to have noticed that the solo was choreographed by Cunningham.
in the online version of the *Journal*). The choreomusicality here is tighter than anywhere else in Graham’s dance, the dancer’s movements seeming almost to visualize the score at times. At the outset of the solo, Cunningham’s choreography projects a crisp rhythmic clarity, the Revivalist’s steps marking the low half notes in clarinet and bassoon. He stands especially tall and stiff, his right fist clenched against his breast. On each of the *col legno* eighth notes in the low strings, the right leg, having swung out the instant before, is snapped back to the left. The movement is short and sharp, like that of a soldier coming to attention. The whole style of the solo contrasts radically with the openness and levity of the dancing by the Husbandman and Bride that precedes it. Just before rehearsal 72 the Revivalist takes a wider stance and begins to stretch out his arms. On the sudden *sforzando*, however, he dramatically contracts into his core with his head ducked under the crook of his arm, seemingly shielding himself from the now wrathful sound of the score. A second futile attempt to expand results in the same *sforzando* contraction, again mirroring the music’s collapse into that brooding minor seventh. The Revivalist comes out of his crouch on the unarticulated downbeat of the fourth measure of rehearsal 72 by whirling around to point at the couple. Cunningham points sternly and accusingly ten times in the solo, seven times directly at the bride and groom. Like the inward snap of the leg on the *col legno* notes, like the contractions on the *sforzandi*, the pointing is sharp and precise in its synchronization with the score. The accent here is not on the movement’s initiation but on its completion, such that each point of the finger lands directly on the beat, not after it. The solo becomes more and more frenetic. At the *forte* before rehearsal 77 the Revivalist’s final sequence of movements intensifies together with the dynamic markings (see Example 6). After falling to the floor he repeats movements presented earlier: scurrying upstage in an upturned crab walk, shuffling stage left on his knees with his hands tightly clenched in prayer at his chest, standing to spin and point at the couple stage right. Across these final eleven measures the dancer’s choreomusicality moves from a low to a high degree of synchronization, climaxing in his pointing on the final *fff* chord before the cold, unforgiving silence of the grand pause at the solo’s end (see Figure 4).

As in the Cage-Cunningham collaborations from the previous two years and some of Graham’s own choreography from the 1940s, the onstage dance-drama choreographed by Cunningham here mirrors backstage resentment. *Appalachian Spring* was the last in a line of choreographies in which Erick Hawkins had the male lead while Cunningham played second fiddle. Throughout his time in the company and no matter how superior his dancing, Cunningham was most often literally upstaged by Hawkins and Graham.

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94. The best access to Cunningham’s solo is provided by Bertram Ross’s filmed 1958 performance, available on the DVD *Martha Graham in Performance*.

95. John Butler, the dancer who replaced Cunningham in the company, recalled that “[Graham] was, of course, completely in love with Erick [Hawkins, the Husbandman in *Appalachian Spring*]. She gave Erick everything. I don’t know whether or not Merce felt left out to the point that Merce finally had to leave and I took his place”: quoted in Tracy, *Goddess*, 96.
Example 6  Copland, *Appalachian Spring* (original 1944 version for thirteen instruments), rehearsal 77. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the *Journal*.
Example 6  continued
as leading Man and Woman. In many dances Cunningham’s role was not only supporting but also neutered. In Graham’s Punch and the Judy, Hawkins plays the Husband to Graham’s Wife while Cunningham plays the Pegasus who transports her to a land of dreams. In Graham’s Letter to the World, based on the life of Emily Dickinson, Hawkins plays the Lover and Cunningham plays March, who represents the “wayward, elfin spirit of Dickinson’s
frolicsome wit.96 And in Graham’s El penitente the title role is given to Hawkins, who self-flagellates his shirtless chiseled body downstage while Cunningham, a Christ figure hidden under a robe and, later, headgear by designer Isamu Noguchi, stands upstage. Cunningham must have relished finally taking center stage in Appalachian Spring to denounce Graham and Hawkins in a virtuosic solo that he had choreographed himself.

One might think that the Revivalist would have more in common thematically with the judgmental Nearpeople than with the Mad Ones in Four Walls, which Cunningham had created and performed just weeks earlier. Were that the case, the Revivalist would represent those who promote marriage not as a meeting of two people in love with each other, body and soul, but as an impossible commitment demanded by a tradition-bound society. The movement vocabulary that Cunningham uses for the Revivalist’s solo, however, reflects that of the Boy in Four Walls as well as that of Cunningham’s virtuosic early solo Totem Ancestor, which was inspired by movement he had seen at a Swinomish ritual on an island in Puget Sound.97 Here, as

96. The description is that of Agnes de Mille: de Mille, Martha, 242.
97. Fellow Cornish student Bonnie Bird introduced Cunningham and his friend Joyce Wike to Swinomish dancing on Puget Sound; see Bell-Kanner, Frontiers, 116–18. Alastair Macaulay has
in *Four Walls* and *Totem Ancestor*, Cunningham’s upper back and shoulders actively pull back, the head and sternum facing skyward as if readying for spirit possession (see Figures 5a and 5b). And as in *Totem Ancestor* Cunningham uses his powerful legs to quickly change levels, from a high jump directly into a kneeling or crouching position. All of this fury is combined with the energy of those turns that stop on a dime with a sharply accented point at Graham and Hawkins. Suggesting far more than a general sense of religious frenzy, Cunningham’s Revivalist does not attempt to preach to or discipline the newlyweds, much less bless them; rather, like the Boy and Mad Ones in *Four Walls*, he damns them and the idea of marriage.

As a young dancer with hopes of a career beyond that of a featured member in Graham’s company, Cunningham would have eagerly read the reviews of his performance, which can only have stoked his confidence and ambition. From the reviews of 1946 it is apparent that Cunningham left the company just as the critics were at their most ecstatic. Of his performances in the two-week run at Broadway’s Plymouth Theatre in early 1946—a run that was an unprecedented box office success for Graham—Rosaly Krokover wrote, “Merce Cunningham revealed that he is probably the finest male American modern dancer before the public.” Another critic pointed out that Cunningham did not have enough material in which to shine: “*Appalachian Spring* is one of few compositions that give Merce Cunningham opportunity to display the magnificent virtuosity of which he is capable. His

shared with me his unpublished chapter on Cunningham’s relationship with the anthropologist Joyce Wike, who, in interviews with Macaulay sixty years later, suggested that the dances of the Swinomish seemed to be reflected in still photos she had seen of *Totem Ancestor*. The Swinomish jump from a low position close to the floor, as if “pulled into the air,” just as Cunningham does in both *Totem Ancestor* and the Revivalist’s solo. See Macaulay, “Ambiguities of Merce Cunningham,” ch. 7. This detail about the Swinomish dances, however, does not appear in Wike’s 1941 MA thesis, “Modern Spirit Dancing of Northern Puget Sound.”

98. Writers have neglected to notice that 1946—not 1945 or 1944, as some have it—was actually Cunningham’s last year in Graham’s company. This has been the result of an uncritical echoing of Cunningham’s own emphasis on his 1944 and 1945 solo concerts and the narrative about leaving Graham that he repeatedly provided. In reality, he needed the exposure and support of Graham for a few more years after his first solo outings. The chronology has recently been corrected in the updated online and mobile application version of Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham*, accessed April 12, 2018, https://www.mercecunningham.org/history/merce-cunningham-65-years/.

99. John Martin wrote in the *New York Times* that “Martha Graham’s ‘experiment’ with a two-week Broadway season was such an outstanding success that there is talk of a spring season when she returns from touring some time in April. The recent engagement at the Plymouth Theatre started only moderately well but ended with eleven of the fifteen performances completely sold out, including all the legal standing room, and many people were turned away”: John Martin, “The Dance: Ballet Repertory,” *New York Times*, February 10, 1946, 48. See also John Martin, “Graham Dancers in ‘Punch and Judy,’” *New York Times*, January 28, 1946, 15.

solo section, while slower in tempo than last season, remains a highlight. 101

There was even one New York critic who knew that the choreography for

the Revivalist was Cunningham’s and wanted everyone else to know it too—Richard Lippold, an editor and critic for the monthly journal Dance Observer.102 Of Cunningham’s performance during the 1946 early winter run on Broadway, Lippold wrote, “Merce Cunningham’s ‘March’ [from Letter to the World] has become a classic, and his solo, to his own choreography in Appalachian Spring, brings new life to a piece whose backward-looking is indicated in its sub-titled explanation, and he restates here a faith in the magic and power of movement itself.”103 This public acknowledgment of “[Cunningham’s] own choreography” in a journal created and managed by Louis Horst (Martha Graham’s longtime music director, friend, and confidant) would have raised a few eyebrows in the Graham company. His praise of the “movement itself” for a solo so clearly character-based and dramatic strongly suggests that Lippold was aware of the direction Cunningham wanted to take in his own dancing outside of that company. The New York modern dance scene of the 1940s, though busy, was small. Such reviews would have provided Cunningham with more than enough confidence to strike out on his own. By 1946 he wanted to produce a less obviously dramatic and denotative mode of dancing.104

102. Lippold’s wife Louise started taking classes with Cunningham around this time. The couple would quickly become very good friends with Cage and Cunningham. Two years later all four would be at Black Mountain College, where they would collaborate on Cunningham’s production of Satie’s Le piège de Méduse. Today Richard Lippold is best known not for his dance reviews but for his sculptures, such as the massive Orpheus and Apollo that hung in the lobby of the David Geffen (formerly Avery Fisher) Hall at Lincoln Center until its temporary removal for restoration in 2014. One of his early works hung in Cage’s Lower East Side loft; see “Four Artists in a ‘Mansion,’” Harper’s Bazaar, July 1952, 78–79. Lippold moved into Cage’s building and shortly thereafter had an affair with artist Ray Johnson. Cage composed music for Louise Lippold’s choreography in the 1950s.

103. Richard Lippold, “Martha Graham and Dance Company,” Dance Observer, March 1946, 34–36, here 35. Lippold’s “sub-titled explanation” probably refers to the two-sentence description of the work that Graham included in the program for the premiere: “Part and parcel of our lives is that moment of Pennsylvania spring when there was ‘a garden eastward in Eden.’ Spring was celebrated by a man and woman building a house with joy and love and prayer; by a revivalist and his followers in their shouts of exaltation; by a pioneering woman with her dreams of the Promised Land”: quoted in Pollack, Aaron Copland, 401.

104. It was not just in the nation’s dance capital that Cunningham stood out within the company. Throughout the Sol Hurok tour in the winter and spring of 1946, he—much more than the other two “principals” (Erick Hawkins and May O’Donnell)—was repeatedly singled out in reviews, especially for his brief solo as the Revivalist in Appalachian Spring. In Chicago Claudia Cassidy wrote, “The best way I can describe Mr. Cunningham is to say that if he were a race horse I would bet on him every time just for the spring in his walk that threatens momentarily to fly”: Claudia Cassidy, “On the Aisle: Martha Graham and Aaron Copland Good Companions in Superb ‘Appalachian Spring,’” Chicago Daily Tribune, March 18, 1946, 21. In this same review, Cassidy wrote of Letter to the World that “[t]he work as a whole was not quite in its best estate yesterday, tho [sic] Mr. Cunningham’s March wind had a special likeness to St. Patrick’s day in the morning.” In a concise review of the same Chicago performance, another critic draws attention to Cunningham: “Merce Cunningham writhe and caracols through the role of the revivalist with feverish intensity”: William Leonard, “Martha Graham at Opera House,” Journal of Commerce, March 18, 1946. In Cincinnati, “The outstanding dance [in Appalachian Spring] was that of Merce Cunningham who, as the Revivalist, made ‘Hell Fire and
Cunningham’s final performance with Graham’s company was on May 10, 1946, at Columbia University’s McMillin Theatre before the invitation-only audience of the Second Annual Festival of Contemporary American Music. Appalachian Spring formed the first half of the program; the premiere of Graham’s Serpent Heart (later known as Cave of the Heart), in which Hawkins played Jason to Graham’s Medea and in which Cunningham was not cast, formed the second. Not surprisingly, most of the reviews, focused as they were on the premiere, offered the now expected praise of Appalachian Spring (“a classic . . . just two years old, yet has already been elevated to stardom”). They did not go into further details or specifics about the performance. As always, Cunningham’s Revivalist was the first dancer to enter the stage, walking through Noguchi’s skeletal suggestion of a house frame. When he exited shortly before the dance’s end, Graham and Hawkins, the pioneer newlyweds, were left on it. After intermission the couple would dance the tragedy of Jason and Medea. Cunningham was now ready to turn away from Graham and the straightforward sexual psychodrama on which her work often centered.

Only two nights later, on May 12, 1946, Cunningham gave his third dance recital in New York City. It was a long way from his first all-Cage concert, as it was his most diverse yet in terms of the music choreographed. It included not only the second New York performance of Idyllic Song (Cunningham’s choreography to the first movement of Satie’s Socrate) but also The Princess Zondilda and Her Entourage, a dance-drama for three characters with music by Alexei Haieff; Fast Blues, for which Cunningham was accompanied by the jazz drummer Baby Dodds; and Alan Hovhaness’s Invocation to Vahakn. Within a month Cunningham was with Cage in Pittsburgh, where they taught together and performed works including Idyllic Song. On October 27, 1946, John Martin announced the season lineup for the new Ballet Society (renamed the New York City Ballet two years later) directed by Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine. The season would include a performance of a commissioned ballet, Northwestern Rite (the title would later change to Seasons), by Cage, Cunningham, and Noguchi in May 1947. The night before Martin’s announcement, in a shared concert with former and current Graham dancers Jean Erdman and Yuriko, Cunningham Damnation’s’ sing the eyebrows of those in the front rows”: Howard W. Hess, “Martha Graham Brilliant in Dance Program,” Cincinnati Times-Star, March 21, 1946. And a review of a St. Louis performance including Appalachian Spring, Letter to the World, and Every Soul Is a Circus concludes, “Merce Cunningham, to come to individual credits, seemed the most exciting of the nine dancers”: Jack Belch, “The Graham Dance Recital Last Night,” Saint Louis Post Dispatch, March 23, 1946. Clippings of all the reviews cited in this note may be found in the Martha Graham Collection, Box 324 (#330, 332, 334), Music Division, Library of Congress.


106. An exception is the uncredited staff review “New Work by Martha Graham” in the June 1946 issue of Musical America: “In this latter and familiar composition both Miss Graham as the Bride and Mr. Cunningham as the Revivalist outdid themselves, and the rest of the cast was in fine form.”

also performed *Idyllic Song*, which would remain in his repertory until 1948, when he assisted Cage with his Satie Festival at Black Mountain. By the late 1940s Cunningham was well on his way to a choreomusicality that avoided expected step-to-note relationships, which he and Cage would associate with their earlier, meaning-laden choreographies. As we will see, however, his choreographies to Satie (first in 1944, then again in 1953, 1956, and 1969–70) represent liminal and retrospective stages in his aesthetic development, choreographed as they were to preexisting music and expressing love as expansive and joyful—as what he and Cage referred to as “Eros.” The couple’s engagement with Satie’s music was a rather happy affair that sets it apart from both their darker early works and their later works, in which, coextensive duration aside, the structural and expressive ties of music and dance were severed.

“I Wanted Dada, Not Mama”: Satie and Erotic Ambiguity

Appreciative of the platform she had given him, Cunningham remained reticent about his departure from Graham. A rare exception is the quip he made to a friend shortly after leaving her company: “I wanted Dada, not Mama.”

The phrase captures not only Cunningham’s wit but also his rejection of heterosexual drama in favor of an artistic practice more in line with his own desires—something queerer. It also points to the composer Erik Satie, who more than any other figure in the historical avant-garde served as an artistic father figure for Cage and Cunningham at this time. In the summer of 1944, as Cunningham was rehearsing *Four Walls* and creating the dance of the Revivalist, Cage introduced him to Satie’s music. The work about which Cage was most excited was Satie’s most atypical and sober: *Socrate*, a three-movement symphonic drama for vocalist or vocalists and chamber orchestra that sets Platonic texts on the life and death of Socrates. Cunningham so liked the work that he choreographed a solo, which he titled *Idyllic Song* to the first movement performed as a piano solo by Cage. This and *Four Walls* were the only dances on which the couple collaborated between Cunningham’s first (1944) and second (1945) New York solo concerts. On November 20, 1944, just one month after the October 20 premiere of *Appalachian Spring* at the Library of Congress, *Idyllic Song* premiered at the well-heeled Women’s Club of Richmond, Virginia, the premiere marking the duo’s


109. For more on *Socrate* and its neoclassical style dépouillé (stripped-down style), see Dorf, “Erik Satie’s *Socrate* (1918).”

110. Several writers have identified Cage’s arrangement of the first movement of *Idyllic Song* as being for piano duo and created in 1945 or 1947; see, for example, Pritchett, *Music of John Cage*, 162, and Nicholls, *John Cage*, 89. However, both the program for the 1944 concert at the Richmond Women’s Club and the review of the concert in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (November 21, 1944) reveal that the arrangement was for solo piano. Cage did not complete a two-piano arrangement of the first movement until 1947, as his manuscripts at NYPLPA show; he would complete a two-piano arrangement of the entirety of *Socrate* in 1969 with the help
first engagement outside of New York and the couple’s first road trip
alone. The dance received its New York premiere at Cunningham’s 1945
concert and then remained in his repertory until 1948. Thematically it dif-
fered markedly from the critique of society and marriage offered by Credo
in Us and Four Walls. Cunningham titled Idyllic Song in earnest, whereas
“A Suburban Idyll,” the subtitle of Credo in Us, is clearly ironic. Like the
Cage-Cunningham collaborations immediately preceding it, however,
Idyllic Song presented music and choreography that were structurally and
thematically interrelated. Before we explore this interrelationship in detail
together with Cunningham’s 1969–70 Second Hand, his choreography to
the second and third movements of Socrate, it will be productive to consid-
er why and how Cage and Cunningham turned to Satie and his music in
order to express their own ideas about Eros, ideas that, given the homo-
phobia of mid-century America, they had no choice but to present ambig-
uously.

Cage became familiar with Socrate just as he was finishing his score for
Four Walls, and shortly after he had resolved to be with Cunningham. That
summer of 1944 he was living without Xenia in Cunningham’s studio on
Seventeenth Street, where he worked on A Book of Music (his first commis-
sion from professional musicians, the piano duo Robert Fizdale and Arthur
Gold, who were also a couple off stage, fairly out for the time and widely re-
ferred to as “The Boys”).111 It was at this time that Virgil Thomson, a critic
who wielded a powerful pen, became especially supportive of Cage and his
music. After a weekend with Thomson in the New Jersey countryside, Cage
sent a letter postmarked July 3, 1944, to Cunningham, who was in Colo-
rado rehearsing Four Walls at the Perry-Mansfield camp. In this letter Cage
positions Socrate as an escape from the direct expression of Four Walls:

Drinks, swimming, damn good food; but best of all was the music and talks
about music. Virgil had brought out one of the rare copies of Satie’s Socrate,
and we must have played and sung it six times. I know now many things
wrong with Four Walls musically, basic of all being that i [sic] made too much
expressiveness via melody-means. Some time i [will] make better music for
you. Socrate is an incredibly beautiful work. There is no expression in the mu-
sic or in the words, and the result is that it is overpoweringly expressive. . . .
Three pieces: . . . The second piece is in the country, and Socrates and his

of Arthur Maddox. A distinct possibility is that he simply played the published piano-vocal re-
duction in Richmond and in subsequent performances.

111. They performed Cage’s work in their debut concert in winter 1945. The couple lived
together until their death, even when embarking on affairs with other artists (such as when Gold
started seeing James Schuyler and Fizdale started seeing Frank O’Hara, both affairs beginning in
1953). When they stopped performing in 1982 they turned their talents to writing—first, Misia,
a biography of Misia Sert, and then The Gold and Fizdale Cookbook. They are buried next to
each other in the Oakland Cemetery in Sag Harbor, New York. See the editorial note by Nathan
Keman in Schuyler, Diary of James Schuyler, 284, and Craig Claiborne, “From 2 Musicians,
companion talk about the history of the spot and how delightful the air and grass is, and there is a slight suggestion that following the conversation they lie down together on the grass... Country was beautiful, and lying on the grass... I could tell how distinctly happy you would be in country wherever; and i really need not be with you for me or for you, because there was facility in inventing your presence and knowing that just then you were merely not visible or not audible.112

Cage’s letter reveals his newly budding desire for music that is expressive in its inexpressivity. Listening to Satie, he realized that his own music could have a greater effect the less he tried to express specific ideas, as he had done in *Four Walls* and *The Perilous Night*. The letter also foreshadows Cage’s growing preference for the country over the city, a preference not really shared by Cunningham. (Cage would spend much of the 1950s and 1960s in Stony Point, north of New York City.) It also makes clear that, to Cage’s mind, when Socrates and Phaedrus (in the eponymous dialogue by Plato from which the text of the second movement of *Socrate* is drawn) lie on the grass under the plane tree next to the river, it was an erotic experience, one that Cage imagined and wished to reenact with Cunningham.

Cage’s “facility in inventing [Cunningham’s] presence” when his lover was “merely not visible or not audible” is the principal theme of the letters they exchanged in July 1944 while Cunningham was traveling. Bold for the time, Cage barely masks the eroticism in his writing (“enigma,” again, referring to Cunningham’s penis):

> today is beautiful and i am dreaming of you and enigma and how we are together today: your words in my ears making spirit soar and enigma beside and in me to make the body limp and taut by turns with delight. oh, i am sure we could use each other today.

> i like to believe you are writing my music now: god knows i’m not doing it, because it simply seems to happen.113

The theme of imagining intense personal joy until it arouses the body becomes Cunningham’s motivating concern in *Idyllic Song*, as his brief program note for the dance suggests: “The seeing of things hidden to everything but the personal, the individual imagination, and the wooing of these to human touch.”114 In the context of the Cage-Cunningham collaborations immediately surrounding it, Satie’s *Socrate* and Cunningham’s choreography of its first movement provided a break from scores, choreographies, and dance

113. As published in *Selected Letters* the words “spirit soar and enigma beside and in me to make the body” have been replaced by “[me]” (70). I suspect this is not because the editor or her assistants are prudish, but rather because a whole line of text was accidentally skipped during transcription and later corrected with an inserted “[me].” This would make sense given that the half title page of *Selected Letters* bears a photographic reproduction of this letter with the missing line in tact.
114. The program note is reproduced in Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham*, 34.
librettos that portrayed unhappy marriages. Satie’s *Socrate* and *Idyllic Song* mark the couple’s turn from angst and critique toward newfound personal and creative freedom and sexual fulfillment associated with Cage’s transition from husband of Xenia Kashevaroff to partner of Merce Cunningham.

From the first private performance of the work in Paris in 1918, Satie’s *Socrate* had served as a rallying point for homosexuals, to an even greater extent than is usual for an artwork occupied with Greek life and love.115 Thomson, as noted in his own memoirs and others’ recollections, introduced the work to many of his queer friends: he played and sang the piano-vocal reduction of Satie’s *Socrate* for Gertrude Stein, Alice Toklas, Paul Bowles, Leonard Bernstein, Lou Harrison, and Ned Rorem, among others.116 Like most, Cage found himself greatly moved by Thomson’s solo performance of *Socrate*. Knowledge of “the *Socrate*,” as Thomson’s Satie circle would always refer to it, was cultural capital, a badge of club status: you had to be hip, eccentric, queer, and/or music-smart enough to get it. In 1949, during the half-year Cage and Cunningham spent cavorting and performing around Paris, Satie and *Socrate* were also hot topics among young French composers. Once Cage had become friends with Boulez, the two passionately discussed and disagreed about Satie at length.117 Cage wrote to his mother that he “went to

115. In the first place, *Socrate* was commissioned by the Princesse de Polignac (born Win- naretta Singer in Yonkers, New York) and first performed for her lesbian salon. Moreover, its excerpts from Plato’s dialogues specifically highlight the loving relationship between Socrates and his disciples in the everyday, rather than his philosophy. Finally, Satie’s sexuality was never not in question. All these facts lent *Socrate* an air that was anything but heterosexual. Samuel Dorf has covered *Socrate* not only in his above-cited “Erik Satie’s *Socrate* (1918)” but also, highlighting the queerness of the work, in his essay “*Étrange n’est-ce pas?*” Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell limn Satie as a possible closet case, a “celibate recluse who preferred homosocial artistic circles and published a passionate statement about his friendship with Debussy yet who vehemently disapproved of open homosexuals”; Fuller and Whitesell, “Introduction: Secret Passages,” 15. On imaginary identification with the ancient Greeks as a melancholic affective communal practice—what he refers to as “to feel historical”—see Nealon, *Foundlings*, 8. For more on the historiography of homosexuality, specifically regarding the connections and ruptures of homosexual identity and desire between antiquity and the recent past, see Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*.

116. Thomson had been championing Satie since his college years at Harvard, where he conducted the American premiere of *Socrate*. The New York music scene over which Thomson presided, and which he promoted as a critic, was largely a network of gay musicians and composers. For an especially vivid account of the music and of Thomson’s performance of it—an account that is immediately and characteristically followed by “In case you’ve been wondering, Virgil and I never ‘had sex’”—see Rorem, *Knowing When to Stop*, 211–12, here 212. Rorem’s introduction to *Socrate*, like Cage’s, was also at Briggs Buchanan’s family house in the countryside of Denville, New Jersey; see Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 120, 372–73, and Hubbs, *Queer Composition of America’s Sound*, 217n1.

117. See Boulez and Cage, *Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, 45. Cage also learned from Boulez the importance of buying a sharp, simple suit: Cage, thirty-six years old at the time, asked his parents for money for a bespoke suit, so that he might fit in sartorially. This is revealed in letters sent by Cage to his mother from Paris, which she collected and pasted into scrapbooks. The
a very beautiful party where [tenor] Hugues Cuénod sang the *Socrate* of Satie. Actually it was not as beautiful as it should have been. He has a very fine voice but as a result he goes about singing too much and never practices enough; so that he made actual errors and didn’t really convey the music.”

Such parties and adventures in taste continued: Cage and Cunningham were able to extend their European travels thanks to a Guggenheim Fellowship awarded to Cage shortly after he arrived in France, one for which Thomson had penned a letter of support. The many clippings about Thomson (the notice of his Pulitzer Prize, concert reviews) that Cage’s mother pasted into the scrapbook she kept during 1949 reveal the high regard in which he was held by Cage and his family. Cage’s close personal association with Thomson and increasing idealization of Satie raised his stock in the postwar music scene, both at home and abroad.

Satie was also instrumental in Cunningham’s success, not least in his own Guggenheim Fellowship, awarded to support his newly founded dance company in 1954. In his grant application he declared his intention to expand *Idyllic Song*, his 1944 solo to the first movement of Satie’s *Socrate*, into a work for his infant company that was set to all three movements. Cage had urged Cunningham to choreograph the whole score ten years earlier, when they had first worked on *Idyllic Song*. While Cunningham’s *Socrate* did not materialize in 1954, his desire to re-present and expand *Idyllic Song* with the other two movements of *Socrate* remained with him for the next fifteen years. By the early 1950s Cage and Cunningham had retreated from works that relied on a denotative notion of expression and started to use chance operations to create their work. Increasingly, and completely by the mid-1950s, the only unifying factor between music and dance in their collaborations was duration. For both artists, however, Satie remained an exceptional composer and exemplar.

Cunningham’s choreography to *Socrate*—his 1944 *Idyllic Song* and his 1970 *Second Hand*—bookended his other forays into the music of Satie. He choreographed dances for the performance of Satie’s play with music *Le piège de Méduse* at Cage’s Satie Festival at Black Mountain College in 1948 (with Buckminster Fuller and Elaine de Kooning in the main roles and sets by Willem de Kooning). At the festival Cage gave his infamous “Defense of Satie” lecture in a dramatically polemical style that today sounds quaint:

With Beethoven the parts of a composition were defined by means of harmony. With Satie and Webern they are defined by means of time lengths.

scrapbooks are now held in the John Cage Collection, Music Library, Northwestern University Library, and are as yet unprocessed.

118. Letter postmarked July 4, 1949, the sixteenth letter in the brown leather scrapbook in the unprocessed box labeled “boy,” John Cage Collection, Music Library, Northwestern University Library.

The question of structure is so basic, and it is so important to be in agreement about it, that one must now ask: Was Beethoven right or are Webern and Satie right?

I answer immediately and unequivocally, Beethoven was in error, and his influence, which has been as extensive as it is lamentable, has been deadening to the art of music. . . .

. . . There can be no right making of music that does not structure itself from the very roots of sound and silence—lengths of time.120

Cage’s understanding of Satie’s “structure” provided validation for his own composition according to “rhythmic structure” as well as for the gradually increasing durations between structural cue points for dance and music in the Cage-Cunningham dances of the 1940s. By 1952, in the dance Excerpts from Symphonie pour un homme seul on the musique concrète of Pierre Schaeffer, Cunningham’s choreography and the accompanying music shared duration without any preplanned internal structural cue points.

After establishing his own dance company in 1953, Cunningham would allow exceptions to his divorce of music and dance and even highlight step-for-note choreomusicality when he choreographed dances to the music of Satie. A first example of these noteworthy, note-abiding exceptions is his Septet, choreographed and premiered in 1953 to Satie’s piano duet Trois morceaux en forme de poire. Cunningham choreographed Septet for six dancers, his title playfully alluding to the fact that Satie’s mischievously titled Trois morceaux actually comprised seven sections of music, not three.121 Recorded with sound in Helsinki in 1964, archival video of the dance reveals how tightly connected Cunningham’s choreography is to Satie’s score.122 This is apparent within the first minute of the dance’s opening section.

The curtain rises on three female dancers positioned across the sharply lit length of center stage. Before the music begins, Cunningham runs on and stops suddenly far upstage in darkness. The music now commences and the women within the light hold each pose before moving slowly to the next, reminiscent of the “plastique” practiced by dancers in the early twentieth century. Cunningham then runs quickly around the lit area all the way downstage, stops, and again runs back upstage, always avoiding the light. He arrives upstage just in time for measure 13, at which Satie’s music references the motive of minor-third descending half notes from his Gnossienne.

120. Cage, “Defense of Satie,” 81–82. For more on Cage at Black Mountain College, see Patterson, “Two Cages, One College.”

121. Shortly before the premiere of Septet at Black Mountain College, dancer Marianne Preger sprained her ankle and two separate dancers covered her part, so the premiere actually was a septet; see Brown, Chance and Circumstance, 73. Subsequent performances had a cast of six, as originally intended.

122. Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Septet, videocassette, 18 min., Jerome Robbins Dance Division, NYPLPA.
On the attack of each of the four loud notes, Cunningham jumps straight into the air. Each time he tilts his head back with his mouth open, as if shrieking together with those half notes. The first and third times, he raises his right arm into the air, the second and fourth times, his left. At measure 15, when a quarter note and half note ascend to end the brief forte phrase, Cunningham jumps for a fifth time but even higher. While in the air he quickly beats his upper chest repeatedly with both hands on the quarter note and, seemingly hovering, ends by throwing both arms above him. Satie’s score propels each of Cunningham’s leaps. The suggestion is confusion, despair, and howling protest, as if the dancer wishes to escape a place that is anything but idyllic to him. He repeats these yelping leaps when the forte half note theme returns in measures 29–31. In the whole rest in the prima at measure 32, Cunningham runs quickly into the bright rectangle of light. He arrives at the centermost female dancer in time to support her more extended and off-balance pose during the pp echo of the accented half notes at measures 33–35. Using a surprisingly strict step-for-note visualization of the music, Cunningham has created a vague narrative. One has the sense that when he enters the stage he has come upon these women not with delight, but as if impelled by some duty to which he responds with confusion and desperation. Unlike Nijinsky’s Faun, the dancer is not here to watch and engage at his own leisurely pace. When he finally moves center stage among the women, his partnering of the central woman is brief and matter-of-fact. Furthermore, he only engages the woman after virtuosic solo material that, though set to coordinated climaxes, is preoccupied with affects other than pleasure.

By the end of the multimovement work, however, there is a sense of peace and successful partnering. In the penultimate movement Cunningham supports the three women in their plastiques, and in the final movement he accompanies a woman off stage as she moves, strikingly, into a backbend.

Two years after the premiere of Septet, Cunningham published a program note for the work, in which he provided odd, seemingly random setting titles for its various sections, such as “In the Tea House” and “In the Morgue.” In this program note he also explained, most unusually for him after 1950, what his choreography was about: “The poetic ambiguity of the music and dance

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123. Example 7 is derived from Satie, Trois morceaux. As noted in the score, the first section of Trois morceaux, “Manière de commencement,” is a two-piano arrangement of an excerpt from Satie’s incidental music for Le fils des étoiles (1891), specifically of material taken from measures 217–305 of act 1. This is noted by Orledge, Satie the Composer, 55, on the basis of the exhaustive research in William Gowers’s dissertation “Erik Satie: His Studies, Notebooks and Critics.” Arranged for solo piano, this would later become known as the “seventh Gnossienne.” This “seventh Gnossienne” from Le fils references multiple motives from Satie’s Gnossienne no. 1 (1890), including, memorably, the “très luisant” half notes, each prepared by a grace note, a minor third apart (though notated in Trois morceaux as an augmented second apart and with an added dissonance, the first half note forming a tritone with the bass; see Example 7, m. 13).
Example 7  Satie, *Trois morceaux en forme de poire*, mvt. 1, “Manière de commencement,” mm. 1–22. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the *Journal*.
titles express[es] the character of this ballet, whose subject is Eros, and whose occurrence is at the intersection of joy and sorrow.124 Even later, in 1973, possibly while considering a revival of *Septet*, Cunningham wrote personal notes about the various movements. He refers to a “sex introduction” in the dance’s fourth section, “In the Playground”; he describes the fifth section as reminiscent of a “formal dance: New England,” where “partners are never exchanged”; and in relation to the final seventh section he writes of “the emotional entanglement having been changed by this exchange

of partners. ” though he never shared this information either with his dancers or with the public, Septet was for Cunningham a dance that charts Eros with “poetic ambiguity,” a progression from sexual fear and repression to liberation.

Cunningham continued to link Satie with the erotic in his dance Nocturnes of 1956, to Satie’s eponymous music: described by Cunningham as a “white ballet,” it too was concerned with the theme of Eros, or, like the title he gave to the dance’s fourth section, “L’Amour.” The dance is lent an even queerer context through its commission by a senior Ted Shawn, one of whose most famous solos, which he had premiered in 1919 and danced for the next three decades, was Gnosienne (A Priest of Knossos) to Satie’s Gnosienne no. 1. Shawn had once been in a marriage of convenience with his dance partner, Ruth St. Denis, but left his wife in the 1930s and founded an all-male modern dance company to whom he would read Plato at lunchtime between rehearsals in the nude. Shawn’s company, which disbanded in 1940, was based in Western Massachusetts at a farm called Jacob’s Pillow, which became the summertime dance festival at which Nocturnes premiered in 1956. Shawn had asked Cunningham for something “light.” While only very brief clips of archival video survive for Nocturnes, there are numerous photographs. The costumes and décor were designed by Robert Rauschenberg. The dancers are all clothed in white, the women wearing bizarre headdresses of white wire and tulle, and the men with their faces painted, one half white, the other red, blue, or yellow. Despite being so unlike the other dances Cunningham created in the 1950s, it was one of which he was obviously very proud: for his first appearance on the cover of a major national magazine, the Saturday Evening Post, in 1968, Cunningham had the photographer capture him in his rather theatrical face paint for Nocturnes, with the caption “Who is this man?” (see Figure 6).

Cunningham’s Satie dances, like his makeup, both conceal and reveal him. Scholars in art and dance are quick to connect Cunningham with Marcel Duchamp, who reveled in playing with identity and its relationship to sexuality, whether in his photos as his drag alter ego, Rrose Sélavy, or in his long-brewing Étant donnés, a work that may or may not refer to his own sexual history. Cunningham’s Walkaround Time from 1968 famously featured an onstage replica of Duchamp’s The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors.

125. Merce Cunningham Dance Company Choreographic Records, (S) *MGZMD 295, Box 12, Folder 7, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, NYPLPA.
126. Cunningham refers to it as a “white ballet” in Cunningham and Lesschaeve, Dancer and the Dance, 92. “L’Amour,” the working title of the fourth section of Nocturnes, is found in Vaughan, Merce Cunningham, 96.
127. See Cunningham, Changes (no page numbers, but page 44 if the first recto after the title spread is counted as page 1): “shawn had asked us to return to jacob’s pillow the following summer. a new work! a light one! nocturnes. but i asked for a light work! well, it’s all in white.”
128. For a representative selection, see Vaughan, Merce Cunningham, 54–55, 92–95.
Even ("The Large Glass") manufactured by Jasper Johns in consultation with Duchamp. Writers and art historians such as Moira Roth and Jonathan Katz have rushed to connect Cunningham’s “aesthetic of indifference” and “performative selves” with Duchamp. 129 It is clear from his choreography,

129. See note 11 above.
however, that Cunningham, like Cage, first looked to Satie as a role model for both self-presentation and self-concealment.

“The Seeing of Things Hidden to Everything but the Personal”: Socrate, Cunningham’s Idyllic Song and Second Hand, and Cage’s Cheap Imitation

Socrate remained the most important of Satie’s works for the two men. It was the first score they had explored together in 1944, during the passionate beginning of their relationship, and the first to which Cunningham, that same year, had choreographed a dance. In the summer of 1969, Cunningham, now fifty years old, decided to return to his 1944 solo Idyllic Song, set to the first movement of Satie’s Socrate. He would finally complete the goal laid out in his successful 1954 Guggenheim grant application, choreographing the second and third movements of Socrate and presenting them after his 1944 solo to the first movement. The summer of 1969 was one of protests and unrest: the Stonewall Riots, for example, occurred only blocks away from Cunningham’s home and studio. It was also almost two years since Cage had been firmly rooted in New York, having taken a residency at the University of Illinois that would then be followed by another residency at the University of California, Davis, in the fall of 1969. Satie’s Socrate and Cage’s presence in New York in December of 1969 represented the return of things that were dear and important to Cunningham. The two men would now turn their attention back to the joy that Satie’s Socrate had given them twenty-five years earlier.

Choreographing the remainder of Socrate in late 1969, however, turned out to be more of a challenge than a joyous consummation. Indeed, the number of difficulties that Cage and Cunningham encountered and surmounted in finally completing their grand collaboration on Satie’s Socrate stands as evidence of just how important this project was to them. Together with Arthur Maddox, Cage prepared a two-piano arrangement of Socrate, without its sung text, for the premiere of the dance scheduled for the company’s January 1970 run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, but in a major setback the publisher of Socrate, Max Eschig, refused rights for the performance of this arrangement. Additionally, while the Brooklyn Academy of Music offered to pay both for performance royalties and for a full orchestra and vocalists, Eschig demanded that the company perform the work with full forces in at least eight cities with populations greater than one million—an undertaking that would have entailed costs well beyond the resources of the company and the majority of its presenters. Cage therefore came to the

130. See Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation Inc. Records, Additions, (S) *MGZMD 351, Box 86, Folder 1, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, NYPLPA.
rescue, preparing a monophonic piano solo that followed certain aspects of *Socrate*’s melodic line. While the original melody’s meter, rhythms, and, at times in the second and third movements, intervallic distances were maintained, Cage transposed its pitches by consulting the *I Ching*. Like his 1940s piano arrangements of *Socrate*, this new recomposition entirely dispensed with the libretto, excerpts from Plato’s dialogues selected by Satie from the translation by Victor Cousin. Cage titled his *Socrate* recomposition *Cheap Imitation*: it imitated Satie’s original just enough to cue the dancers. And instead of titling his choreography *Socrate*, as planned, Cunningham called the dance *Second Hand*. The first movement of *Cheap Imitation* contains the music that is most distant from *Socrate*, as Cage transposed each pitch separately. This increased level of transformation posed no difficulties, however, as the first movement accompanied Cunningham’s 1944 solo, which he knew inside and out. The third movement of *Cheap Imitation* is the most similar to *Socrate*, as original interval relations are sometimes maintained over the course of a measure. This is not because Cage had certain sonic preferences for this movement; rather, the third section of *Second Hand* was choreographed for ten dancers who had previously depended on musical cues in Cage’s two-piano arrangement. For the collaborators and the dance company, then, *Socrate* was present just beneath the surface of *Cheap Imitation*. But for the audience and critics of the January 1970 premiere, Satie’s work (its music, its libretto, its movement titles) was suppressed, unheard.

Following the first performances of *Second Hand* in Brooklyn, word spread quickly among the dance community that, contrary to his habitual procedure, Cunningham had choreographed *Second Hand* to the music of *Socrate*. In response, a terse note appeared in the programs for all subsequent performances that included *Second Hand*, acknowledging that *Cheap Imitation* was a chance-derived arrangement of *Socrate*’s “three movements: The Banquet; On the Banks of the Illysus; Death of Socrates.” Yet while *Second Hand* remained in the company repertory for the next three years, neither Cunningham nor his critics presented audiences with much information about the relationship between *Socrate* and Cunningham’s dance. After the premiere of the revival in March 2008, Alastair Macaulay’s glowing review in the *New York Times* appeared under the headline “The Dance Has a Meaning, but That’s Not the Point.”

131. See the program for any post-premiere performance that included *Second Hand* from 1970 to 1972, such as the one at Berkeley on January 23, 1971: Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation Inc. Records, (S) *MGZMD 196, Box 52, Folder 2, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, NYPLPA.*

132. The review appeared on March 29 (B7, B13).
the company’s repertory), the performance of the work’s somber third section at the Cunningham Memorial Concert in the Park Avenue Armory in October 2009, and its performance during the 2009–11 Legacy Tour before the Merce Cunningham Company was dissolved, no commentator has connected the choreographic specifics of Cunningham’s Second Hand through Cage’s Cheap Imitation to Satie’s Socrate. Similarly, the importance of Cunningham’s representation of his 1944 Idyllic Song as the first section of his 1970 Second Hand has yet to be explored. As mentioned above, in 1944 Idyllic Song represented the “seeing of things hidden to everything but the personal” for Cunningham and Cage. Idyllic Song was a celebration of an Eros that could not be widely broadcast; it was the opposite of the critique of passionless marriage for propriety’s sake found in the couple’s Credo in Us and Four Walls, and in Cunningham’s contribution to Appalachian Spring.

Three passages from Second Hand demonstrate some of the most meaningful connections between the choreography and the unheard text and transformed music of Socrate. The choreography for the second section of the dance consists of a lyrical duet that was danced in 1970 by Cunningham and Carolyn Brown, who had remained, after Cunningham, the most highlighted and lauded member of the company since its inception in 1953. The text of the second movement of Socrate is excerpted from a particularly mundane discussion in Plato’s Phaedrus. Phaedrus and Socrates, deciding on a place to sit outside the city walls, eventually settle on a spot under a plane tree:

SOCRATES: By Hera, what a charming place to rest! How broadly the mighty plane tree spreads its branches! And this chaste-tree with its arms shooting up and the fine shade it gives, could one not think it is in flower, just to scent the air? I ask you, what could be more gracious than this brook which runs beneath the plane tree, whose water our feet have proved is cool and fresh? At the point in Satie’s score at which the two men reach this spot and praise its beauty, Cunningham and Brown (representing Socrates and Phaedrus respectively) dance a combination of steps that they repeat four times. At the end of each combination they both go to the floor and strike a reclining pose (see Figure 7). In a video clip from a Brooklyn Academy performance of 1972, which is one of only two performances of Second Hand recorded in the 1970s and the only one to include audio, a note prepared by a heavily accented octave grace note is especially noticeable at this point, as Cage plays Cheap Imitation on a piano in the pit (see Video Example 3 in the online

133. On the basis of performances and reviews from 1970–72, a few writers have noted very general programmatic elements in the work; see Brown, Chance and Circumstance, 536–39; Smoliar, “Merce Cunningham in Brooklyn”; Klosty, “Cunningham and the Critics”; and Burt, Male Dancer, 146–47.

134. This is Antony Melville’s English translation of Victor Cousin’s French translation of Plato’s Phaedrus, from which Satie drew the text for the second movement of Socrate: Satie, Mammal’s Notebook, 70.
version of the Journal. This loud accent occurs at measure 161, the end of this “under the plane tree” combination, the point at which the female dancer descends to the floor for the fourth and final time (see Example 8b; Example 8a shows the corresponding passage in Socrate). This is a clear example of the depiction by Cunningham’s choreography of imagery from the unheard text of Socrate. The female dancer even flexes her feet, as if feeling the brook’s cool water. Cueing this final “under the plane tree” pose is Cage’s extremely heavy accent on the grace note, in the context of an otherwise cool and legato piano, an accent not found in Satie’s Socrate. Cage was providing an exaggerated cue from the pit for the company’s two most experienced dancers, dancers who in 1972 had been performing and rehearsing this choreography for two years.

Cage’s loudly accented cue in the second movement of Cheap Imitation reveals how difficult it must have been for Cunningham and Carolyn Brown to align choreography originally set to Satie’s score with Cage’s even more monotonous Cheap Imitation. This difficulty is magnified in my next example, which involves ten dancers in the middle of a longer phrase within a considerably longer movement. Standard operating procedure for Cunningham dancers, whether those of 1970 or those of 2011, just before the company

135. The video is held by the Merce Cunningham Trust.
136. Examples from Socrate are derived from Satie, Socrate; examples from Cheap Imitation are derived from Cage, Cheap Imitation.
Example 8a  Satie, *Socrate*, “Bords de l’Illisus,” mm. 154–62. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the *Journal*. 
ceased operations, was to maintain their own dance counts in relation to the overall progression of the dance. After many rehearsals with a stopwatch they were able to perform an hour-long choreography with little variation in duration from performance to performance. But in *Second Hand* they were dancing *to* music. A question remains: why would this pose a challenge to dancers who took a daily technique class to the accompaniment of a pianist playing in clear meters?

When Cunningham choreographed the dance in the summer and early fall of 1969—at that time still to Satie’s *Socrate*—he did not have a score. Rather, Cage mailed him a rather idiosyncratic explanation of the score’s “phraseology” (the peculiar, nonstandard term the two used throughout their lives) from the University of California, Davis. Cage first equated a certain number of measures with a certain number of seconds for the benefit of Cunningham and the stopwatch he always carried while choreographing and rehearsing. Cage also indicated his understanding of where phrases started and ended simply by giving the number of measures per phrase. Cunningham wrote out the libretto of Satie’s score, most likely copying from the sleeve of the LP recording of *Socrate* that was then available,137 and, presumably counting along with the recording and using Cage’s time estimates, he inserted the measure numbers of Cage’s phrases above the words of the text (see Figure 8a).138 As if this were not confusing enough, one of Cage’s given “phrases” lasted for forty-eight measures. This occurred about fourteen minutes into the seventeen-minute-long third section of the dance, the section Cunningham choreographed for the entire company. It is clear from Cunningham’s preliminary personal choreographic notes that he had difficulty in keeping track of where Cage’s phraseology counts fell in relation to the text.139 He apparently wanted to create a final choreographic moment for himself as the Socrates soloist, in which he would dance in unison with

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**Example 8b**  
Cage, *Cheap Imitation*, mvt. 2, mm. 154–62. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the Journal.

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137. This recording, by the Paris Philharmonic Orchestra under René Leibowitz (Counterpoint / Esoteric Records 510), provided the complete French text.

138. Cunningham’s manuscript dance “libretto” for *Second Hand*, a portion of which is shown in Figure 8a, is held in the Merce Cunningham Dance Company Choreographic Records, (S) MGZMD 295, Box 12, Folder 6, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, NYPLA.

139. Notes for *Second Hand*, ibid.
the entire company. This would be tricky: he wanted that moment to occur in the middle of the forty-eight-measure phrase, a phrase that he and nine dancers had to count mentally throughout their rehearsals. The matching portion of his final notes for the third section further reveals the frustrating
recalculations he made when attempting to align this section with Satie’s score (see Figure 8b). The question mark placed after “48 M[ea]sures” tersely signals that Cage’s parsing of Satie’s phraseology was not at all helpful.

140. Figure 8b is reproduced from Cunningham’s notes for Second Hand, ibid.
in this instance. In an otherwise fairly clean copy of final personal choreographic notes, this scribbled correction stands out. It represents the difficulty of getting multiple traffic patterns of dancers to arrive together for a moment of unison ensemble dancing in the middle of a forty-eight-measure phrase. The challenge of this unison moment was especially apparent in the March 2008 rehearsals for the premiere of Second Hand.\(^{141}\) Performing Carolyn Brown’s part, the dancer Andrea Weber would, following her counts, travel into place for the ensemble kick phrase that she was to initiate. She often realized that no matter how carefully she was counting, she would arrive in place too early. It looked odd: the dancers would stand still and wait for several seconds, creating a large break in the dance’s flow. Then, in unison, they would perform three high kicks (grands battements).

It seems clear that Cage tried to compensate for the difficulty caused by his odd forty-eight-measure “phrase,” in that he deviates from his I Ching–derived recomposition at this point in Cheap Imitation in order to create a cue for the dancers. He begins measure 245 of his recomposition with an accent that is not found in Satie’s score (see Example 9b; Example 9a shows the corresponding passage in Socrate). This downbeat accent cues the company to begin its unison passage with its first high kick. On the high A on beat 3 of measure 245, the ensemble strikes its second kick. On the high A on the downbeat of measure 246, the dancers kick for the third time. On the final high A in the middle of measure 246, they all fold forward at the waist before rising again and scattering out of their unison formation. If Cage had been following his chance operations to the letter when recomposing Satie’s score, the three high As across these two measures would be statistically improbable. (It would not be the first time Cage had temporarily abandoned such operations.) Rather, he was assisting the dancers with a cue for this final moment of unison dancing with the Socrates soloist. The ensemble’s battements occur during the following line in the unheard libretto: “Meanwhile Socrates, who was walking about said he could feel his legs getting heavy, and he lay down on his back as the man had recommended.”\(^{142}\) Unlike his followers, Socrates is losing feeling in his legs. Soon after this moment of dancing in unison with the company, Cunningham-as-Socrates will sit and observe the other dancers from the floor. His last movement in the work is to rise slowly from the floor and walk to the farthest point upstage center. Here he becomes immobile while the rest of the company continues to dance downstage. The conclusion of the dance, from the unison leg kicks with Cunningham to the company’s final unison passage downstage without him, before the dancers walk off as the curtain falls, subtly portrays Socrates’s death and the inevitability of his followers going on without him. This

\(^{141}\) Rehearsals at the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio, Westbeth, New York City, in February and March 2008, attended by the author.

\(^{142}\) Satie, Mammal’s Notebook, 72.
Example 9a  Satie, *Socrate*, “Mort de Socrate,” mm. 241–47. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the *Journal*.
poignant ending suggests Cunningham’s recognition of the widening gap between himself and his dancers in age and ability, and in the understanding of his work’s history and meaning.

A third and final example links *Idyllic Song* (1944) directly with the third section of *Second Hand* and also demonstrates Cunningham’s belief that his attempts at self-expression would remain inscrutable to others, “hidden to everything but the personal.” The choreography for *Idyllic Song*, which became the first section of *Second Hand*, is generally tranquil, reflective, and purposefully slow. At measure 21, two-thirds of the way into the first movement of *Socrate / Cheap Imitation*, the tone changes, the soloist’s tempo accelerating as he executes what is the most rapid movement in the entirety of *Second Hand*. Shifting balance from his left leg to his right, his left arm cuts across the space in front of his chest; he then shifts back to his left leg and resets (see Figure 9a), only to shift back to his right leg, the left arm again cutting across. He repeats this side-to-side motion, constantly accelerating the movement. It is as if he is cutting blades of tall grass, speeding up to the point where his arms become a blur. He then stops suddenly, moves into relevé on the balls of his feet, and passes a hand over his head as if amazed at what has just happened to him. At this point in the first movement of *Socrate*, the text is an extract from the *Symposium* in which Alcibiades celebrates the effect Socrates has upon him: “For me, my friends, did I not fear to seem to you completely tipsy, I would swear to you under oath the extraordinary effect his speeches had on me and still do now. Listening to him, I feel my heart beating more powerfully than if I was shaken by the manic dancing of a group of corybantes.”

This is the climactic moment not only of the first section of *Second Hand*, but also of the only angst-free Cage-Cunningham collaboration of 1944, *Idyllic Song*, set to Cage’s performance of the first movement of *Socrate* as a piano solo. Choreographing *Idyllic Song* in conjunction with

143. A video recording of the final performance of *Second Hand* by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, December 8, 2011, is held by the Merce Cunningham Trust.

Satie’s music and libretto in 1944, Cunningham captured on stage the excitement experienced by the younger, fitter Alcibiades in the company of the older, wiser Socrates, just as, off stage, he himself had been falling in love with, and under “the extraordinary effect” of, John Cage.

Cunningham not only recycles this memorable side-to-side cutting gesture representing Alcibiades’s “heart beating” in the first section of Second Hand, he dances it again in the third section, but at a considerably slower pace while standing apart from the company (see Figure 9b). In this third section the other dancers never make eye contact with Cunningham-as-Socrates, even when he partners them. As if the point needed to be made any clearer, at the moment in the third section when the first section’s memorable highlight is repeated, the male soloist is isolated all the way upstage. The company is downstage, gazing toward the wings. This is very similar to the final moment of the dance, when Cunningham remains stranded far upstage center, while the others continue dancing downstage of him without noticing him. Thus, a gesture that in 1944’s Idyllic Song had expressed the joy and excitement of Eros is recalled in the third section of 1970’s Second Hand as one that is ignored even by those closest to the dancer. Its presentation in the third section of the dance is not mournful, but melancholic. Cunningham’s choreography dramatizes the fact that his earlier dependence on personal expression is now illegible and meaningless to audiences.
Cunningham wanted his 1940s audiences to know that he was expressing “the seeing of things hidden to everything but the personal,” as his program note stated. But by 1969 things had changed. Avoiding personal expression in favor of non-intention for decades, Cage and Cunningham gained not only an international reputation within the avant-garde but also a newfound freedom and focus that made composing and choreographing a more disinterested and less risky affair, less a matter of exposing themselves. In *Second Hand* and *Cheap Imitation*, however, the couple look back and acknowledge the former attempts at expression that had sustained their early collaborations, long before they became celebrated for the divorce of music and dance.

**Beyond a Platonic Cage-Cunningham**

In time, audiences learned not to expect Cunningham’s choreography to be in step with the music that shared time and space with it, music that his dancers basically ignored as they counted and executed the intricate rhythms of steps created independently of it. They expected music by contemporary musicians (Cage, Tudor, Mumma, Bryars, Radiohead), sometimes very loud, as well as stage décor, sometimes brash, by contemporary artists (Johns, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Nauman, Lichtenstein). They knew there would be no narrative, no unifying theme. Many came for the movement itself—sharp, irregular rhythms, unexpected changes of direction across a
decentered stage space, different parts of the body operating independently of each other. They came to see some of the world’s most intensively trained dancers perform this exacting movement with a hyperalert purposefulness that made the present moment seem more alive with possibility. Cunningham’s choreography embodied modernist difficulty for mind and muscles alike.

For an example, let us consider a brief excerpt from a solo passage in Cunningham’s Split Sides of 2003, as danced by Silas Riener in a performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in December 2011 (see Video Example 4 in the online version of the Journal). Having danced alone on stage for a minute and a half, Riener pauses for a half second. He is facing downstage left with his legs in a very wide fourth position, his left heel planted a few feet in front of his right, knees slightly bent. He is leaning forward at the waist with his arms overhead, extending the line of his torso. From here he unexpectedly springs forward, turning clockwise in the air. Now facing stage right, he lands on his left foot with his right leg held aloft at a ninety-degree angle to his upper body, which is still hinged forward at the waist. He performs what athletes call a pistol squat: he bends his left knee until he is nearly sitting on the stage, his right leg held in front of him parallel to the floor. Re-straightening his left knee, he moves back up just as smoothly as he went down except for a split-second twist of his upper body flashed to the audience, a spasm mid-ascent that throws the fluidity of the squat into relief. Once upright, he rises high onto the ball of his left foot and balances here for four seconds. As if to lie back on the air behind him, he arches from his upper back until his chest points skyward and his head hangs so that he briefly sees, upside down, the stage behind him (see Figure 10). Out of this one-legged backbend, he tilts forward and lands on his right foot. With a single-footed hop he turns toward the audience, sharply slicing the air in front of him with his right hand, and leans forward while bringing his left leg around and behind him into a momentary arabesque. The solo continues, much of it with Riener balanced on one foot and, vertiginously, with his head tilted back, jugulars exposed, and gaze directed upward. The solo is exhausting for the dancer, who makes it look effortless through an impeccable sense of timing and line, as well as a strong quadriceps and Achilles tendon.

Focusing on the dancer, falling into his rhythm, an audience member might barely perceive the music, registering it as no more than a background blur, or even stop listening to it entirely. As Riener performed this solo at the Brooklyn Academy on December 9, 2011, there were beeps of the sort that might emanate from a hospital room, amplified dry percussive effects produced on a xylophone-like sculpture of ballet pointe shoes attached to contact mics, tinklings of music boxes, and a simple five-note A minor melody.

145 Riener’s solo may be seen in a video recording of the performance held by the Merce Cunningham Trust.
played on a synthesizer. None of these sounds cued Riener’s movements. This music was Sigur Rós’s *ba ba ti ki di do*, commissioned for *Split Sides* by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. During this solo in other performances of *Split Sides* audiences might hear *Untitled*, a composition by Radiohead: an onstage roll of dice a few minutes before the curtain rises determines the music for each half of the work.  

When the solo is performed as an excerpt within a Cunningham *Event* (a mashup of excerpts drawn from across Cunningham’s repertory), one hears altogether different music (most often improvised, most often deliciously loud) performed live by musicians and sound artists. Throughout all of these performances the

146. The dance *Split Sides* is a forty-minute work that consists of two twenty-minute choreographies (referred to as A and B), two twenty-minute scores (Sigur Rós’s *ba ba ti ki di do* and Radiohead’s *Untitled*), two sets of costumes (one black and white, the other multicolored), two lighting designs (one brighter, one darker), and two backdrops (one cobalt and lavender, the other black, white, and gray). Dice are rolled on stage before the performance each night to determine which score, costumes, lighting design, and backdrop will be used for each of the two choreographies. At the work’s premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on October 14, 2003, which I attended, Cunningham dryly announced the stakes of each roll to the chuckles of the audience: “Radiohead: even; Sigur Rós: odd.”

147. On February 11 and 12, 2017, Riener performed this solo as an excerpt within the context of an *Event* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. On February 11, just off stage, bassoonist-improviser-composer Katherine Young wailed *fortissimo* into her microphone.
choreography for the solo is always the same. Its choreomusicality, however, is necessarily unfixed and random.\textsuperscript{148} There are no preplanned cues, no explosive coordinated climaxes. As in all of Cunningham’s mature work, the dance is not wedded to the music heard with it.

Just as Cunningham’s choreography resists an attachment to its accompanying music, so too is it especially resistant to the prose of critics and scholars, most of whom describe no more than a striking moment and almost never a sequence of specific movements. Commentators most often discuss Cunningham’s choreography with a wide lens that conveys an overall impression and aesthetic. They tend to favor the general over the specific, whether they are writing about a representative later work such as \textit{Split Sides} or an anomalous earlier work such as \textit{Second Hand}. And just as music and dance operate independently of each other on Cunningham’s stage, so too do music scholars and dance scholars.

While writers have not explored the specific programmatic and expressive concerns of \textit{Second Hand} and \textit{Cheap Imitation} in detail, they have noted the larger change in the aesthetics of Cage and Cunningham that is contemporary with these works. Several music scholars have acknowledged that \textit{Cheap Imitation} was a major stylistic turning point in Cage’s career. James Pritchett presents \textit{Cheap Imitation} as Cage’s “return to composition,” as a piece that demarcates the “period of Cage’s work beginning in late 1969—and extending, I think, through the rest of his life,” and as one that reveals that “there was a good deal of [Cage’s] past work above a stream of elastic noise from the software-based instrument played by Stephan Moore, who was also mixing the thunderous cacophony emerging from the speakers, while turntablist KG Price prepared to spin Matmos’s \textit{EP Ganzfeld}. On February 12, Riener performed his solo while violist Hanna Brock played \textit{sul ponticello} and murmured into her mic, Nicolas Collins played various handheld electronic instruments of his own invention, and Moore again performed his software-based instrument while mixing the trio into a multichannel roar, the volume of which rivaled some of David Tudor’s infamously earsplitting electronic creations for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company.

\textsuperscript{148} Coincidences can happen such that a step and a note seem synced. Toward the end of Riener’s solo at the Brooklyn Academy in December 2011, for example, when he was standing upstage, he stepped left on a loud percussive attack, an effect repeated a second later as his arms pulsed out at his sides. Such moments of synchresis (Michel Chion’s term for “the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon”: Chion, \textit{Audio-vision}, 63) register as nonevents for twenty-first-century sensoria nurtured on a synchresis-heavy diet—whether Balanchine ballets or Beyoncé videos, slapstick effects in early sound cartoons or the slap of a hockey puck on television. Synchresis can seem newly surprising and estranged in the context of a Cunningham dance’s overall choreomusicality. For the “Mickey-Mousing” aspect of synchresis in cartoons, see Goldmark, \“\textit{Sounds Funny / Funny Sounds}”; for the same in film, see Jacobs, \textit{Film Rhythm after Sound}; and for the same in dance, where to some it seems especially passé after Cunningham’s choreomusical revolution, see White, \“As If They Didn’t Hear the Music.” On the idea that the effects of synchresis, “even if aesthetically meager, are acoustically wondrous and philosophically dense,” see Abbate, \“Sound Object Lessons,” 797.
that was still alive within him.\textsuperscript{149} Extending this idea, David Bernstein suggests that this turning point could be seen as a return to Cage’s earlier expressive practices.\textsuperscript{150} Most recently, Benjamin Piekut writes of Cage’s change in trajectory with \textit{Cheap Imitation} in 1969 that his “return . . . to the musical traditions of Western Europe” meant that “[m]usic history again became available, but the modality of the choice was such that tradition could function only as nostalgia, material stripped of its original social or musical function.”\textsuperscript{151} Focused on experimentalism, Piekut opposes the “musical traditions of Western Europe” and “music history” to Cage’s oeuvre. As music scholars increasingly write about Cage and divide his compositional output into generally accepted periods, the relationship of his music to Cunningham’s dances goes increasingly unnoted—a modernist historiographical phenomenon familiar to anyone who has researched \textit{The Rite of Spring}. Acknowledging the more local, pressing, and specific “original social or musical function” of \textit{Socrate} for Cage and Cunningham, one might conclude that it represents anything but modernist (or postmodernist, or experimentalist) material stripped down, whether in 1944 or in 1969. For Cage and Cunningham, the original social function of \textit{Socrate} was a celebration of Eros and their new personal relationship, which could only be indirectly expressed in their work in the 1940s. Satie’s score, as Cage wrote to Cunningham in July 1944, was diametrically opposed to the portrayal and critique of unhappy marriages in the couple’s contemporary work, \textit{Four Walls}.\textsuperscript{152} Within a few months of first hearing the piece, the couple used \textit{Socrate} as the accompaniment for the lyrical solo in which Cunningham sought to express Eros. It is this desire to express Eros that, twenty-five years later, in 1969, Cunningham recalls and dramatizes in \textit{Second Hand}.

Just as no music scholar has examined the dance for which \textit{Cheap Imitation} was composed, no dance scholar focused on \textit{Second Hand} has examined its score. Several dance scholars and critics have noted that after 1972 (when \textit{Second Hand} left the company’s repertory and when Carolyn Brown left the company) Cunningham’s choreography becomes more innovative but also more seemingly inhuman, almost robotic. Critics write of his dancers’ more impressive technique but also of their occasionally depressing lack of affect

\textsuperscript{149} Pritchett, \textit{Music of John Cage}, 162, 166.

\textsuperscript{150} Bernstein, “Techniques of Appropriation,” esp. 86–87. See also Bernstein, “John Cage and the ‘Aesthetic of Indifference,’” which historicizes Cage’s practice of an “aesthetic of indifference” (Moira Roth’s term for the expressive and sociopolitical neutrality of the work produced by Cage and others in his Duchamp-influenced coterie) and concludes by noting that in his very late works “Cage had returned to the expressive world of his earlier works; the sounds that one hears are not only sounds, they are also John Cage” (130).

\textsuperscript{151} Piekut, \textit{Experimentalism Otherwise}, 59.

\textsuperscript{152} See pages 486–87 above.
on stage, “what has since become a look of psychological ‘emptiness.’”153 Yet apart from a few scattered comments by company insiders, the importance of Cunningham’s return to Socrates has gone unacknowledged. Whereas Cheap Imitation marked Cage’s return to expression and even his subsequent citation of the canon he had formerly abandoned, for Cunningham Second Hand was a final adieu to expressing a narrative on stage and to choreographing a step to a preexisting note.

Creatively, then, Cunningham and Cage moved in contrary motion with respect to their use of expression after Second Hand. Domestically, however, they finally moved in together and secured better working space. In 1971 Cunningham’s company was granted heavily subsidized headquarters and studio space in the massive penthouse of “Westbeth,” the former Bell Laboratories building at the intersection of West and Bethune Streets in New York City’s West Village that had been newly repurposed as an artists’ community with support from the Kaplan Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts (see Figure 11).154 Cunningham and Cage moved into a garden-level apartment only two blocks away.155 From the summer of 1972, on the West Village’s charming Bank Street, they lived together—openly, officially—for the first time in their long personal relationship, having previously always maintained separate addresses. Looking through the correspondence held in the John Cage Collection at Northwestern University, one notices that in the late 1960s only a few writers (close friends such as Teeny Duchamp and Minna Lederman) address the men as a couple in salutations or valedictions. It is not until the late 1970s that a letter addressed to both Cage and Cunningham or including both men in the valedictory wishes begins to seem unremarkable.

Historians of art, literature, and music have not been shy in connecting Cage’s readings of Satie, Thoreau, and Duchamp to his writings and poetry. They have been less willing to highlight such direct influences in his music.156

153. Franko, Dancing Modernism / Performing Politics, 85. Writing in 1995, Franko goes on, “Currently, Cunningham’s performers appear visually homogeneous with the media’s understanding of his ‘revolution’ in what seems to be an attempt to eliminate expressivist values entirely. Their movement reveals nothing about who they are; their presence is both efficient and removed; their movement is in response to the ‘sensations’ of arbitrariness. Cunningham’s later work no longer calls expressivist values into question: It has become inexpressive rather than anti-expressivist” (ibid.).

154. Westbeth would remain the base of operations for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company until its final performance on December 31, 2011, and for the Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation until it ceased its operations and turned over Cunningham’s legacy to the Merce Cunningham Trust in June 2012.

155. This was before they moved to the more spacious, light-filled Chelsea penthouse (seen in their filmed interviews and in documentaries such as Caplan, Cage/Cunningham: A Film) where they would remain for the rest of their lives.

156. A notable exception is the sustained exploration of Cage’s understanding of Satie presented in Perry, “‘A Quiet Corner,’” in which the author notes that “Cage’s ascription of his
This is partly attributable to the air of autonomy that many scholars have preserved around his compositions, an air that Cage himself ultimately encouraged. Similarly, dance scholars have become complacent about the idea of Cunningham’s oeuvre as a total embodiment of the medium-specific, high modernist ideal of movement stripped of all extrakinesthetic reference and meaning. Most writers have focused on the separation between music and dance, between Cage and Cunningham—a separation that might be seen to be mirrored in the photograph shown in Figure 11. In Second Hand, however, the two artists revealed not only the privileged status they accorded Satie (who became their own version of a Bach or Beethoven, a father figure, a

Figure 11 Merce Cunningham, Carolyn Brown, and John Cage rehearsing Second Hand in the Westbeth studio, 1972. Photograph by James Klosty. Used by permission.

own rhythmic innovations to Satie represents not an accurate depiction of Satie’s own compositional practices, but . . . an exaggeration of incidental features that appear in, at most, a very small sliver of Satie’s oeuvre” (506).

157. George Lewis writes that “the distancing of personal narrative updates the concept of a post-Kantian ‘autonomous significant structure’” even though the reality is, to paraphrase Charlie Parker, “what you do live does come out of your horn”. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950,” 118, 119. See also Lydia Goehr’s understanding of the incompatibility between Cage’s theories and his practice, the latter ultimately remaining dependent on the formal constraints of the work-concept: Goehr, Imaginary Museum of Musical Works, 264; this is directly echoed in Taruskin, “No Ear for Music.” For more on Cage’s authorial control of his work and the fact that he might have seen “homosexuality as a limit on subjective expansion,” see Dohoney, “John Cage, Julius Eastman,” 50.
hero) but also part of themselves and their history. Philip Brett suggests that, for future scholars wishing to say something interesting about the possible relation of Cage’s sexuality to his work, “[a] good place to start would be his collaborative partnership with Cunningham, which exemplifies many things that musical critics, typically single-minded in their approach, have omitted to notice.”¹⁵⁸ I would suggest that, of course, the same holds for dance writers wishing to relate Cunningham’s work to his life.

The wildly ephemeral and unpredictable nature of performance in its “maniacally charged present” has long been celebrated by scholars in performance studies, even longer by dance writers, and more recently by musicologists.¹⁵⁹ It is this very present that many writers understand the mature work of Cage and Cunningham to heighten and celebrate, and so they discuss the ephemeral, the performative, the indeterminate, the unpredictable, the inexpressible, and the ineffable. Along the same lines, Vladimir Jankélévitch writes of Satie’s Socrate that “[m]usic seems to accept not taking account of Plato’s text as its duty: for, just as the Phaedo conjures away the tragedy of death, so Satie’s psalmody smooths out incidents in the Platonic narrative.”¹⁶⁰ In the face of an aesthetic event, questions of narrative, history, intent, biography, and identity can often seem irrelevant, or at least not very sexy. While I do not wish to discount Jankélévitch’s ineffability, or the valorization of live presence in performance studies, such concerns are not new in the discourse surrounding Cage and Cunningham; if anything, such a focus now risks obscuring or even distorting what actually happened on stage and off. There is no shortage of ideas about the collaborations of Cunningham and Cage; there is, however, a dearth of description, a devaluation of danced detail.¹⁶¹ I began this concluding section of the article with a description of Silas Riener dancing in Split Sides in order to provide a sense of Cunningham’s mature choreography in a specific instance as well as to acknowledge the difficulty of describing it in prose and to highlight its refusal to adhere to

¹⁵⁸. Brett, “Cage, John (1912–1992),” 162. The situation has been slowly improving since Brett wrote this almost twenty years ago. For a recent example of a musicologist working with an intermedial focus that can enhance the history of musical embodiment across media, art forms, and genres while addressing scholars both in and beyond musicology, see Simonson, Body Knowledge.

¹⁵⁹. The phrase “maniacally charged present” is from Phelan, Unmarked, 148; see also the whole of Chapter 7, “The Ontology of Performance,” and the book’s afterword. At the outset of her 1972 book At the Vanishing Point, Marcia Siegel wrote, “Dance exists at a perpetual vanishing point. . . . It is an event that disappears in the very act of materializing” (1). For the comparatively recent—if already seemingly classic—polemical call for musicologists to attend to music’s presence, see Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?”

¹⁶⁰. Jankélévitch, Music and the Ineffable, 46.

¹⁶¹. On the false dichotomy between “description” and “ideas” (and the attendant privileging of the latter) in writing on dance, see Jowitt, “Beyond Description.” For a similar promotion of description, but from a music-theoretical angle, see Dubiel, “Analysis, Description, and What Really Happens.”
accompanying music or stable meaning. However inelegant and imperfect, a description of the dance and its music (and the increased attention and patience such description requires of writer and reader alike) seems preferable to exclaiming “Doubly ineffable!” and calling it a day.\(^{162}\) The description can, of course, barely hint at the “maniacally charged present” of witnessing Rieger live in performance. One might ultimately agree with Cunningham, who said of dancing that it “gives you nothing back, no manuscripts to store away, no paintings to show on walls and maybe hang in museums, no poems to be printed and sold, nothing but that fleeting moment when you feel alive.”\(^{163}\)

That fleeting moment, however, occurs in history, which is the larger concern of this article: to show how Cage and Cunningham’s sexuality and offstage partnership informed their early expressive works and affected their larger aesthetic trajectories. When I spoke with Cunningham in 2008 during rehearsals for the revival of Second Hand, the most striking moment in our conversation was one without words. Cunningham smilingly asked to see my copy of the published score of Cheap Imitation. The score on his lap, he turned to the page that precedes the first movement. Here, in his distinctive handwriting, was Cage’s note explaining how the I Ching was used in his re-composition of Socrate. Running his hand over the page, Cunningham became unable to speak, holding back tears. After a few moments of silence, we continued our discussion. Like many of their generation, Cage and Cunningham found that they could not speak about their personal partnership or its connection to their work. Their inability to discuss this has sometimes been a source of frustration for later generations. Listening to or reading the transcript of Wood Massi’s 1988 interview with Cage today, one cringes at Cage’s resistance to acknowledging that his homosexuality has shaped even the most general contours of his life, or that his relationship with Cunningham might be of interest, and perhaps even inspiration, to other queer people.\(^{164}\) Cage states, “I have been able, myself, to say that even though I practice homosexuality, I am not a homosexual. That I happen to love that

\(^{162}\) In their call to rethink description, Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best propose “shifting from the assumption that describers readily apply words to worlds to an awareness of just how difficult it can be to do so”; Marcus, Love, and Best, “Building a Better Description,” 10. They end with the simple suggestion that writers in the humanities might describe “not to explain or interpret [a phenomenon], but to make it visible” (15). “Description” here is the close, less reticent cousin of the Gumbrechtian “deixis” championed by Abbate in “Overlooking the Ephemeral,” esp. 81–83.

\(^{163}\) Cunningham, Changes (no page numbers, but page 86 if the first recto after the title spread is counted as page 1).

\(^{164}\) A transcript of the interview, together with letters from Massi to Cage, may be found in the John Cage Correspondence, Box 49, Folder 7, Sleeve 4, John Cage Collection, Music Library, Northwestern University Library. Massi played a cassette tape of the entire interview to me during a telephone conversation in December 2017.
person anyway.” As Wood Massi commented in conversation with me, one is all too aware that Cage grew up in a different era; that he saw his mentor, Henry Cowell, imprisoned at San Quentin for engaging in oral sex with another man; and that he saw his friend Lou Harrison fully come out only after his nervous breakdown, and ultimately fail to receive the same amount of attention and respect as Cage himself.¹⁶⁵

Cage and Cunningham were, for the most part, neither willing nor able to discuss their sexuality and relationship. It does not follow, however, that historians need be silent. Theirs was a long relationship, both personal and professional, and claims about the supposed inexpressiveness of and non-correspondence between their music and dance do not accurately represent their entire oeuvre. Turning to the archives before reconsidering the scores, the choreographies, and their interdependence in both live and filmed performances challenges a priori assertions about expressive intention and ineffability.¹⁶⁶ Such an approach seems newly necessary when an important part of history—whom and how one loves—and its mark on artworks is dismissed as irrelevant.

Second Hand and early collaborations such as Credo in Us and Four Walls do not suggest an “aesthetic of indifference” containing “no messages, no feelings and no ideas.”¹⁶⁷ On the contrary, these collaborations reveal the couple’s desire to critique unfulfilling marriages and, in the case of the Satie dances, to express and celebrate Eros and “the seeing of things hidden to everything but the personal, the individual imagination, and the wooing of these to human touch.” Challenging the “critical straightening” of Cage and Cunningham might be best achieved not by theorizing the lack of content in their most canonic work within the larger historical moment in which it occurred (understanding 4′33″ as “a means of a historically specific queer resistance during the cold war”), but rather by examining the formal specifics of their collaborations together with the historical specifics of their personal relationship.¹⁶⁸ Analyzing choreomusicality and contextualizing intention across the long Cage-Cunningham partnership checks an all too Platonic discourse that has closeted a fuller understanding of the couple’s works and lives, and the many relationships between them.

¹⁶⁵. At one point in the interview Cage identifies himself as “Merce-esque.” For Massi, such an acknowledgment at that time, however tiny, was a welcome improvement over Cage’s 1970 interview with Daniel Charles, in which, when asked about sexuality, Cage replied by talking about the sexual nature of mushrooms: Cage and Charles, For the Birds, 226.

¹⁶⁶. For an eloquent challenge to understandings of performance’s ineffability and disappearance, and a reconsideration of the logic of the archive vis-à-vis performance, see Schneider, Performing Remains.


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**Abstract**

This article explores the early collaborations of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, in which music and dance were united structurally and in expressive intent. Drawing on unexamined archival materials, I begin by highlighting the thematic content of the earliest Cage-Cunningham collaborations, *Credo in Us* (1942) and *Four Walls* (1944), of Cunningham’s (rather than Martha Graham’s) choreography for the Revivalist’s solo in *Appalachian Spring* (1944), and of Cage’s *The Perilous Night* (1943–44), premiered at the couple’s debut concert. These works all portray a conflict between sexual desire and social conformity through marriage, a theme of pressing import as Cage left his wife to become Cunningham’s partner. I then elucidate the programmatic nature of the first and last works that Cunningham choreographed to the music of Satie, *Idyllic Song* (1944) and *Second Hand* (1970), both of which use Cage’s arrangements for piano of Satie’s *Socrate*. Placing Cunningham’s personal choreographic notes in dialogue with my own observation of rehearsals and performances, I suggest that *Second Hand* dramatizes not only the Socratic texts set in Satie’s score but also the couple’s relationship and their earlier dependence on and subsequent rejection of personal expression, a rejection that heightened their status within the postwar avant-garde. Instead of dismissing the collaborations of the 1940s as “early” or “anomalous,” I suggest that they are fundamental to understanding how Cage and Cunningham’s relationship prior to their de facto marriage led to one of the most productive divorces in the history of artistic collaboration.

**Keywords:** John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Erik Satie, *Appalachian Spring*, modern dance, LGBTQ history