

Notational and Editorial Practice in John Cage's *Aria*

by Manuel Farolfi

During the winter of 1958–59, John Cage resided in Italy for four months. Though brief, this period was remarkably fertile.¹ In Italy, Cage composed *Fontana Mix* (1958–59) for magnetic tape, *Aria* (1958) for voice, and two pieces for television performance, *Water Walk* (1959) and *Sounds of Venice* (1959). Inspired by her mimicking of renowned singers and the vocal noises she used to perform as a private joke, Cage composed *Aria* for Cathy Berberian, and, to some extent, in conjunction with her. The piece was premiered by Berberian on 5 January 1959 in Rome, accompanied by *Fontana Mix*. On Cage's return to the United States, an autograph manuscript of *Aria* remained in the possession of Berberian and, as a result, is amongst the materials held within the Cathy Berberian Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation.² The John Cage Music Manuscript Collection at The New York Public Library also contains a manuscript instance of the piece, which the catalogue describes as the holograph that Cage provided to Edition Peters for the publication of the score.³ Other than these two, no further manuscripts of *Aria* have apparently survived. Nonetheless, the examination of these documents leaves little doubt that the autograph left to Berberian must be the earliest fair copy of the piece prepared by Cage in 1958. The consistency between this document and the one held in New York City, as well as their materiality, suggests that, before his departure from Italy or, perhaps, on the occasion of Berberian's 1960 American tour, Cage must have made a copy of the former with sheets of tracing paper. Afterwards, this copy would be used for the published version of the score. This essay is a study of these two manuscripts. The aim is to locate this material within Cage's notational and editorial practice in the late 1950s.

The notational layout on which *Aria* is based is somewhat similar to what Cage had used for his realization of *Music Walk* (1958) two months earlier

1 For information about John Cage in Italy see Manuel Farolfi, "John Cage in Italy, 1958–59" (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2022), and the website www.johncage.it/en/index.html.

2 The Cathy Berberian Collection also contains two printed copies of *Aria* with performance annotations not always traceable to Berberian's hand.

3 John Cage Music Manuscript Collection, JPB 94-24, folder 232.

and to those of *Water Walk* and *Sounds of Venice* which would follow. Here, too, the score pages are landscape-oriented and present the events scattered from left to right in space equal to time. There are two event types which Cage names “vocal lines” and “noises.”⁴ The former consists of letters and fragments of phrases in five languages presented in association with curved lines suggesting pitch contours. These lines are in ten different colors which represent any ten singing styles established by the performer. The “noises” are notated as black squares and may be freely interpreted as the “‘unmusical’ use of the voice, auxiliary percussion, mechanical or electronic devices.”⁵ As Cage stresses, “[t]he notation represents time horizontally, pitch vertically, roughly suggested rather than accurately described.”⁶ Notably, the principle that pitch information is a function of the vertical dimension of the notational framework lies at the basis of several other graph-like notations of the period, such as the notation Y, AO, AQ, and BY of the *Solo for Piano* (1957–58). Despite these similarities, in scoring *Aria*, two new notational devices were introduced: one relates to Cage’s decision to notate vocal events graphically as pitch curves, the other is the idea to use a color code to provide some of the information in the score.

Despite the variety of curves and biomorphic shapes present in many of Cage’s scores from the 1950s, there seem to be only a few instances before this point in time comparable to the curves which appear in *Aria*. One is the curved line that Cage used to notate the siren whistle in *Water Music* (1952). Also, a few similar lines appear in the realization of *Music Walk*, even though it is not wholly clear whether their vertical aspect refers to pitch or amplitude. At any rate, given the pace at which Cage was developing new notational devices, the direction taken with *Aria* is not surprising. At the same time, one might well argue, as Petkus does, that such pitch curves resemble the heightened neume notation of the Medieval era, even though there seems to be no documentary evidence showing that this is the source that inspired Cage.⁷ Importantly, it is with *Aria* that Cage used colors as notation for the first time. This feature recalls George Brecht’s *Confetti Music* (1958). In his piece, Brecht used color cards to determine sound sources such as the gong, prepared guitar, and gamelan. Brecht composed *Confetti Music* while attending Cage’s course in ‘Experimental Composition’ at the New School for Social Research in New York in July 1958. As Kim suggests, if, on the one hand, some elements in *Confetti Music* could be seen in relationship to works such as Cage’s *Music for Piano* (1952–56) and *Variations I*

4 John Cage, *Aria* (New York: Peters, cop. 1960; EP 6701).

5 Cage, *Aria*.

6 Cage, *Aria*.

7 Janetta Petkus, “The Songs of John Cage (1932–1970)” (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 1986), p. 135.

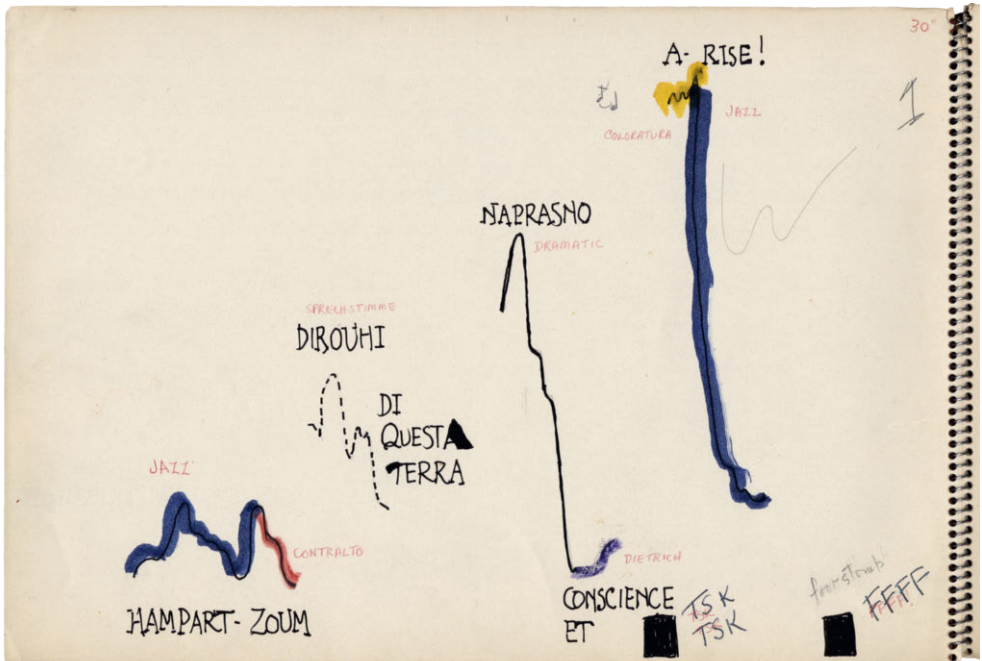


Plate 1: John Cage, *Aria*, autograph manuscript, p. [1] (Cathy Berberian Collection, PSS; © 1960 by Henmar Press Inc., New York; with permission of Peters Edition Limited, London).

(1958), it is plausible, on the other, that Cage may have used colors to score *Aria* precisely in light of Brecht's piece.⁸

The manuscript score held at the Paul Sacher Foundation (hereafter MS 1) consists of a brown spiral sketchbook branded "Sterziana" with the Italian heading "Schizzi e disegni" on the hard cover.⁹ On the first page, Cage wrote the title, the dedication ("For Cathy Berberian"), the place and date of composition ("Milano 1958"), and the signature "J. C." The notations are arranged on twenty pages in side-by-side view. MS 1 reveals that Cage drew the vocal lines first in pencil and then in ink, while a mixture of markers and crayons was used in order to add colors (see Plate 1). Furthermore, MS 1 shows a number of handwritten notes which Berberian added over time to help her performances. These markings include information regarding which singing style corresponded to which color, and the type of noise chosen for each black square. Furthermore, the pages

⁸ Rebecca Y. Kim, "The Formalization of Indeterminacy in 1958: John Cage and Experimental Composition at the New School," in *John Cage*, ed. by Julia Robinson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 141–70, esp. pp. 150–51.

⁹ In English: "Sketches and drawings."

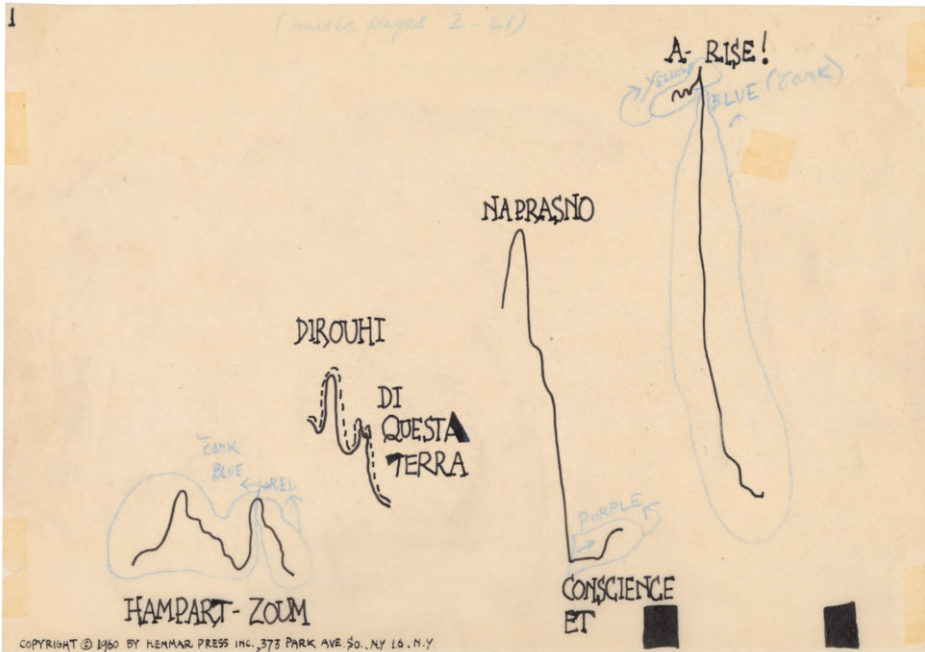


Plate 2: John Cage, *Aria*, autograph manuscript (The John Cage Music Manuscript Collection, The New York Public Library; © 1960 by Henmar Press Inc., New York; with permission of Peters Edition Limited, London).

appear numbered in pairs 1–10 in Berberian’s handwriting, likely to indicate minutes in clock time.

The manuscript held at The New York Public Library (hereafter MS 2; see *Plate 2*) consists of twenty-one sheets of tracing paper inscribed in ink (one page of instructions and twenty pages of notations) with notes in blue pencil to indicate the color of the vocal lines. Overall, there is great consistency between MS 1 and MS 2. Doubtless Cage prepared the latter by superimposing sheets of tracing paper onto the former. It is important to note that both Cage’s and David Tudor’s manuscript collections include a great deal of translucent and transparent materials, mostly tracing paper and diazotypes on film.¹⁰ Cage variously used these supports for compositional, notational, and editorial purposes. The tracing paper (also known as vellum or onionskin paper) was often used to create straightforward quality duplicates of scores and/or notations. Furthermore, as well as being easy to edit and amend (even once inscribed in ink), this translucent

10 Due to their longstanding collaboration, the David Tudor Papers, held at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, include a large amount of Cage’s musical manuscripts.

material was particularly suitable for preparing masters to produce diazo-type copies.¹¹ Before electrostatic photoreproduction (Xerox) was perfected in the 1970s, diazotype technology (often called “Ozalids”) had been the predominant small-run copying method for architectural and music reproductions.¹² After the acquisition of his music in 1960, Edition Peters gradually transferred Cage’s back catalogue from manuscript to diazotypes and photostats. In this sense, the way Cage employed tracing paper to duplicate MS 1 and, then, to print the score of *Aria* from MS 2 was hardly uncommon in his notational and editorial practice of the time.

Yet, in preparing the copy Cage made a few minor changes to MS 1. First, and most remarkably, the timings in clock time that were applied to eight events were not transcribed onto MS 2. Second, Cage amended two dotted lines which were missing the parallel solid lines and added a semicolon between two letters in the text. Last, besides a mistake in the transcription of a letter, in MS 2 Cage numbered the pages 1–20 and drew the Henmar Press copyright notice at the bottom of the first page. In view of the publishing process, he also preferred written notes to tints to indicate colors, adding furthermore a page of instructions. Despite these changes, MS 2 clearly appears to be an intermediate copy which sheds light on the editorial process that occurred between MS 1 and the publication of the score.

Interestingly, the Cathy Berberian Collection also contains two printed copies of *Aria*, which, though certainly created from MS 2, differ somewhat from the published version of the score. These copies include the copyright notice, and, as in case of the score, they appear to have been printed in black and white with colors added by hand. However, the title page as well as the page with the dedication appear different. Also, the cover that characterizes all the scores by Cage published by Edition Peters is lacking. Given that *Aria* was not part of the first batch of scores that Cage and the publisher agreed to make available for sale in 1960, it is likely that these two copies were part of an early limited run which may have been realized to provide performers with the score before the publication.

11 Eléonore Kissel and Erin Vigneau, *Architectural Photoreproductions: A Manual for Identification and Care*, 2nd edition (New Castle: Oak Knoll Press, 2009), pp. 112–15.

12 Melina Avery, “Ozalids in the Music Library: Life Before Xerox,” in *The Book and Paper Group Annual* 31 (2012), pp. 17–23.