

Kate Soper

The Understanding Of All Things

For amplified soprano and tape

2013, rev. 2015

Text by Franz Kafka (trans./adapted Soper)

Performance part for vocalist

The Understanding of All Things

Performance instructions

The vocalist is amplified. The live voice (spoken and sung) should have equal presence with the spoken voice and pitches in the tape: this balance should be achieved through both the live performance and the mic/tape mix.

The performance part indicates timings of vocal gestures within one second only: while some timings are more free (for example, the fading in and out of pitches present in the tape), some gestures should be precisely timed. To get a sense of more accurate timings, the performer may want to listen to the live recording available here: <https://soundcloud.com/ateoper/the-understanding-of-all-things>

The Understanding of All Things

Text

Once there was a philosopher who hung about where children played. And whenever he saw a child with a spinning top, he would lie in wait. As soon as the top began to spin, the philosopher would pounce. Though the children shrieked and tried to shield their toy, he paid no attention. As long as he managed to catch the top while it still spun, he was happy, but only for that moment, and then he would fling it down and walk away.

For it was his belief that the understanding of any small thing, such as a spinning top, was sufficient for the understanding of all things. It seemed, therefore, inefficient to him to study complex problems. Once the smallest detail is truly known, are all things known, and so he focused only on the top. And whenever a top was readied to be spun, he hoped that this time he would succeed, and while he was breathlessly chasing after it, his hope would turn to certainty. But as soon as he held the dumb wooden thing in his hand, he felt disgusted, and all at once the howling of the children burst into his ears, battering him away, and he staggered like a top under a clumsy spin.

- Franz Kafka, adapted from *Der Kreisel* ("The Top")

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0:55 1:06

19 *p* *[Sustain pitches until indicated fade-out, sempre non vib.: if no text, sing on any vowel]*

Voice *moment.*

Tape *["he paid no ... as long as he managed to catch the top...still spun, he was happy"]* *["but only for that"]*

0:58 *p*

21 1:11

1:08 *he would fling it down, and*

Voice *wa(lk)*

Tape *["then then then"]* *["and walk away."]*

1:15 *p*

[previous pitches continue sempre]

23 1:28

1:22 *- such as a spinning*

Voice *to[p]*

Tape *["his belief ... any small thing -"]* *["sufficient for the understanding of"]* *["it it therefore"]*

1:30 *p*

25 1:47

1:35 *inefficient to him, to*

Voice *stu(dy)* *known*

Tape *["complex"]* *["smallest ... truly known"]* *["are all things"]*

1:39 *p* *p*

[previous pitches continue]

28 1:52 *[Trade words with tape seamlessly/intelligibly as possible]*

Voice: on the top. a top was readied to be spun,

Tape: *["and ... he focused only -"]* *["whenever-"]* *["he hoped that -"]*

[pitches continue sempre]

31 1:58 2:00 2:04

Voice: this time, he would suc- *[repeat ad lib.]* -cede-cede-cede-cede... chasing after it, his hope would turn to certainty.

Tape: *[top noise]* *["breathlessly"]* *["but as soon as he held"]*

35 2:07 2:10 2:12 2:15

Voice: the dumb, wooden thing he fellll-t disgusted, all at once

Tape: *["in his hand,"]* *["t-t-t"]* *[low burp sound]* *["and and and"]*

39 ca. 2:20

Voice: *p*

Tape: *["howling...into his ears...battering him...and he staggered..."]*

[Crossfade with pitches in tape: timings approximate]

40 ca. 2:30 ca. 2:40 ca. 2:50 ca. 3:00

Voice: *p*

Tape: 2:24 2:34 2:44 2:53 3:04

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3:17

[Continue to trade words with tape seamlessly/intelligibly, sempre]

Voice 41 philosopher where children

Tape ["Once there was a"] ["who hung about"] ["played."]

[pitches continue sempre]

3:28

Voice 42 whenever he saw with a spinning lie in wait.

Tape ["And"] ["a child"] ["top,"] ["he would"]

3:41 3:43 3:47

Voice 43 as the top began to pounce.

Tape ["As soon"] *[spin noise]* ["the philosopher would"]

sf

3:51 3:53

Voice 46 children shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh(sh)ield their toy, no attention.

Tape ["Though the"] ["and tried to"] ["he paid"]

f

3:57

Voice 47 long to catch the top happy, moment, he would fling it

Tape ["as"] ["as he managed"] ["while it still spun, he was"] ["but only for that"] ["and then,"]

4:09 4:20 4:23

Voice 48 down the understanding of any small

Tape ["and walk away."] ["For it was his belief that"] ["such as a spinning top,"]

4:14 4:25

[previous pitches still playing] *p* *p*

50 4:30 ○

Voice complex problems.

all

["was sufficient for the understanding of"] *["it seemed, therefore, inefficient ... to study"]*

Tape 3

4:32 ○ *p*

[previous pitches continue]

51 4:38 4:44 ○

Voice the smallest is truly are all things *p* known

["Once"] *["detail"]* *["known,"]* *["known,"]* *["and so he focused only on the top."]*

Tape 4:45 ○ *p*

[previous pitches continue]

52 4:50 4:55 5:01 ○

Voice - this time, he would succeed. breathlessly chasing after it, *[in unison with tape]* his hope would turn to certainty.

["And whenever a top was readied to be spun, he hoped that"] *["And while he was"]* *["his hope would turn to certainty."]*

Tape

55 5:05 5:09 ○

Voice as soon as he held in his hand, he felt -

["But"] *["the dumb, wooden thing"]* *["disgusted, and all at once,"]*

Tape

56 5:13 ca. 5:19 ○ *p*

Voice

["the howling of the children burst into his ears, battering him away, and he staggered like a top under a clumsy spin."]

Tape

[Crossfade as seamlessly as possible with pitches in tape: timings approximate]

Musical notation for measures 57-60. The Voice track (treble clef) contains notes with crossfade symbols (two slanted lines meeting at a point) above them. The Tape track (treble clef) contains notes with crossfade symbols below them. Time stamps are provided for both tracks: Voice (ca. 5:31, ca. 5:43, ca. 5:55) and Tape (5:25, 5:36, 5:47, 6:00).



[Match rhythm of speech to rhythm of pulsing chord in tape while maintaining natural speaking rhythms, al fin]

Musical notation for measures 58-59. The Voice track (treble clef) includes lyrics: "philosopher, who hung about where" and "a child with a spinning". A piano (*p*) dynamic marking is present. The Tape track (treble clef) includes annotations: ["Once there was a"], ["children played."], ["And whenever he saw"], and a time stamp 6:24. A note in the tape track is marked with a slur and a crossfade symbol below it. The text "[previous pitches continue pulsing chord begins]" is written below the tape track.



Musical notation for measures 60-61. The Voice track (treble clef) includes lyrics: "to(p)" and "as the top began to spin". The Tape track (treble clef) includes annotations: ["top, he would lie in wait."], ["As soon"], ["spin, the philosopher would pounce."], and time stamps 6:33, 6:43, and 6:45. A note in the tape track is marked with a slur and a crossfade symbol below it.

[Continue to match rhythm of speech to rhythm of pulsing chord, sempre, al fin.]

63 6:52

Voice H he paid no attention. as he managed while it still spun,
he was happy,

Tape H *["Though the children shrieked,
and tried to shield their toy."]* *["As long"]* *["to catch
the top"]*

[pitches continue sempre, al fin.]



64 7:06

Voice H for that moment, he would fling it down, walk away.

Tape H *["but only"]* *["and then,"]* *["and"]*



65 7:21

Voice H it was his belief that the understanding of any small thing, such as
a spinning top, was sufficient for the understanding of all things.

Tape H *["For"]*



66 7:33

Voice H It seemed, therefore, inefficient to him to study complex problems.
[tape noises and pitches continue al fin.]



67 7:42 7:47

Voice H Once the smallest detail is truly known, are all things known. H