Aaron Copland's *Old American Songs*

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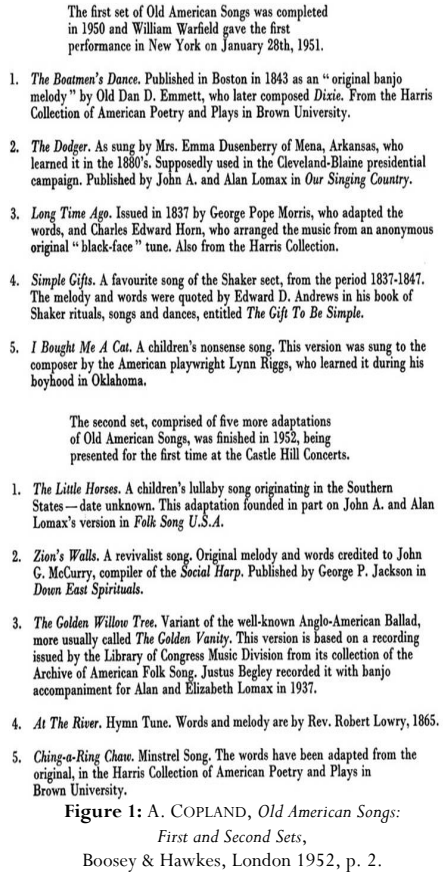
> During the mid-30s I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer. The old "special" public of the modern-music concerts had fallen away, and the conventional concert public continued apathetic or indifferent to anything but the established classics. It seemed to me that we composers were in danger of working in a vacuum. Moreover, an entirely new public for music had grown up around the radio and phonograph. It made no sense to ignore them and to continue writing as if they did not exist. I felt that it was worth the effort to see if I couldn't say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms.[1]

Thus in 1941 Copland explained the change in writing that, in the previous decade, had led him to begin that phase of life which would later be dubbed 'imposed simplicity': in fact, he decided to question the purpose of his modernist aesthetic in favour of a simple musical language, reached between 1932 and 1936 with the symphonic composition *El Salón México* and that, through the use of popular and folkloric melodies and elements, had to be accessible to a wider audience. In line with this new style, during the winter of 1950 Aaron Copland completed the first collection of *Old American Songs*.



The first set of Old American Songs was completed in 1950 and William Warfield gave the first performance in New York on January 28th, 1951.

1. *The Boatmen's Dance.* Published in Boston in 1843 as an "original banjo melody" by Old Dan D. Emmett, who later composed *Dixie.* From the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays in Brown University.
2. *The Dodger.* As sung by Mrs. Emma Dusenberry of Mena, Arkansas, who learned it in the 1880's. Supposedly used in the Cleveland-Blaine presidential campaign. Published by John A. and Alan Lomax in *Our Singing Country.*
3. *Long Time Ago.* Issued in 1837 by George Pope Morris, who adapted the words, and Charles Edward Horn, who arranged the music from an anonymous original "black-face" tune. Also from the Harris Collection.
4. *Simple Gifts.* A favourite song of the Shaker sect, from the period 1837-1847. The melody and words were quoted by Edward D. Andrews in his book of Shaker rituals, songs and dances, entitled *The Gift To Be Simple.*
5. *I Bought Me A Cat.* A children's nonsense song. This version was sung to the composer by the American playwright Lynn Riggs, who learned it during his boyhood in Oklahoma.

The second set, comprised of five more adaptations of Old American Songs, was finished in 1952, being presented for the first time at the Castle Hill Concerts.

1. *The Little Horses.* A children's lullaby song originating in the Southern States — date unknown. This adaptation founded in part on John A. and Alan Lomax's version in *Folk Song U.S.A.*
2. *Zion's Walls.* A revivalist song. Original melody and words credited to John G. McCurry, compiler of the *Social Harp.* Published by George P. Jackson in *Down East Spirituals.*
3. *The Golden Willow Tree.* Variant of the well-known Anglo-American Ballad, more usually called *The Golden Vanity.* This version is based on a recording issued by the Library of Congress Music Division from its collection of the Archive of American Folk Song. Justus Begley recorded it with banjo accompaniment for Alan and Elizabeth Lomax in 1937.
4. *At The River.* Hymn Tune. Words and melody are by Rev. Robert Lowry, 1865.
5. *Ching-a-Ring Chaw.* Minstrel Song. The words have been adapted from the original, in the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays in Brown University.

Figure 1: A. COPLAND, *Old American Songs: First and Second Sets*, Boosey & Hawkes, London 1952, p. 2.

On a visit to London shortly afterwards, he played the songs to Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, who were so fascinated by them that they staged their first performance at the Aldeburgh Festival on 17 June and made a first recording. In America they made their debut on 28 January 1951 at Town Hall, with Copland at the piano and the famous Afro-American baritone William Warfield on vocals. The great success of these delightful songs convinced Copland to write a second collection in 1952: "Everyone seemed to enjoy singing and hearing the first set of folk song settings so much that I decided to arrange a second group of five".[2] The *Old American Songs* thus became ten in total (five for each cycle) and the first complete performance took place on 24 July 1953 at the Castle Hill Concerts in Ipswich, Massachusetts, again by the Copland-Warfield duo. Both cycles were later arranged for voice and small orchestra and achieved great success, many performances, and excellent recordings. The centrality of these songs in Copland's oeuvre became such that some were performed in 1979 when the musician was honoured with the prestigious Kennedy Center Honor Awards.

[1] COPLAND, A. *The New Music: 1900-1960*, W. W. Norton, New York 1968, p. 160.
[2] *ibid.*

In contrast to the elitist character of *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1949-50), the composer's interest in American vernacular traditions finds its greatest fulfilment in the arrangements of these songs for male voice and piano. As stated by the musician himself on the first page of the vocal-orchestral score, the sources of reference were many. Of various inspirations, in fact, the pieces deal with different themes: political and religious, folk, and theatrical. Three are Protestant hymns and religious chants: 'Simple Gifts' was a favourite of the Shaker sect, dated from 1837-1847 and the music and lyrics were taken up by Edward D. Andrews in his book of rituals, songs and dances called 'The Gift To Be Simple'; 'Zion's Walls' was a revivalist song published by George P. Jackson in *Down East Spirituals* whose original words and melody were attributed to John G. McCurry (compiler of *Social Harp*); 'At the River' was a hymn born from the verses and music of Rev. Robert Lowry in 1865. 'The Boatmen's Dance', 'Long Time Ago', and 'Ching-a-Ring Chaw' are rooted in the American minstrel tradition and are excerpts from the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays in Brown University. Two of them are children's songs: the nonsense 'I Bought Me a Cat', sung to the composer by the American playwright Lynn Riggs who had learned it during his childhood in Oklahoma, and the lullaby 'The Little Horses', originating from the Southern United States and taken up by John A. and Alan Lomax in *Folk Song U.S.A.*

The cycle finally is completed by a satirical piece that had been used during the 1884 presidential campaign, 'The Dodger', which was published by John A. and Alan Lomax in *Our Singing Country*, and 'By the Golden Willow Tree', a variant of the Anglo-American ballad commonly called 'The Golden Vanity' that Copland first heard for banjo and voice in a recording issued by the Library of Congress Music Division from its collection of the Archive of American Folk Song.

It was probably this multiplicity of reference models that led Howard Pollack to conclude that the *Old American Songs* provide "a diversified portrait of America itself".[3] Based on the sketches preserved at the Library of Congress in Washington, these collections are in fact the result of a decade of work and rethinking.

These papers shed light on the compositional process: specifically, they reveal how the cycle assumed its final conformation through processes of omission and addition.[4]

In this sense, when analysing the sets one cannot overlook the historical-political period of reference, which was decisive for many of the author's choices; not so much because the *Old American Songs* are the Cold War aberration one might think of if one only takes into consideration the

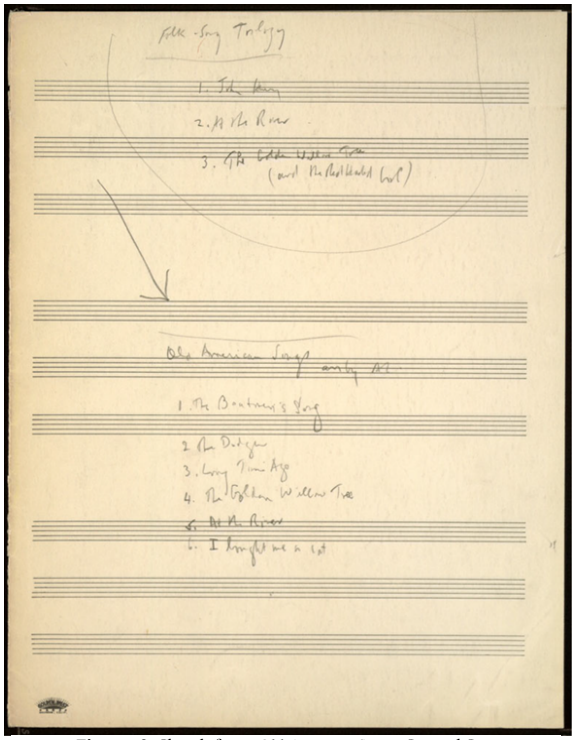


Figure 2: Sketch from *Old American Songs*, Second Set, Aaron Copland Collection, Library of Congress.

[3] POLLACK, H. *Aaron Copland. The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man*. (1999). Faber & Faber Ltd, London. p. 468.
[4] HARTFORD, K. *A Common Man for the Cold War: Aaron Copland's "Old American Songs"*, in *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 98, Issue 4, Dec. 2015, p. 320.

dates of their publication (1950 and 1954, respectively), but rather because they are the fruit of a preoccupation that accompanied the musician over a period of more than ten years. Indeed, it must be borne in mind that in the 1950s the symbolic power of Afro-American singing could be politically too dangerous for a composer with a left-wing past, and the social-political climate therefore prompted Copland to reformulate the collections several times, not only by modifying the selection of pieces to be included, but also through textual omissions and changes.

The sketches for *Old American Songs* seem to illustrate the cycle's continual expansion — from a trilogy to a set of six pieces, to a set of seven, and, finally, to a cycle of ten. 'John Henry' is the sole exception to this continual development. The first dated sketch, dated 9 June 1941, shows that Copland had initially grouped *Three American Folk Melodies*: 'John Henry', 'At the River 'and 'Simple Gifts'; we know, however, that 'John Henry' is absent from the final version of the *Old American Songs*, and it is the only melody mentioned in the manuscripts that has no place in the published collections. The musicologist Kassandra Hartford argues that 'John Henry' figures in so many sketches that it is difficult to imagine that Copland simply changed his mind about its musical value, but there were political reasons to omit the piece.[5] In fact John Henry is an Afro-American folk hero who, in most versions of the folk song and tale at the risk of his life, wins a battle against a steam drill with his hammer. In the 1930s, however, the story stood in not only for the battle between man and machine, but also for that between labourers and the forces of capitalism and its protagonist soon became the brave "hero of the greatest Proletarian epic ever created".[6] It's not a case, indeed, that 'John Henry' was widely performed and recorded by Popular Front-affiliated artists, including Sonny Terry, that Copland held in high esteem.

Since the musician was unable to render the potential political meanings of this song harmless, he decided to take it off from the collection. In removing this piece, therefore, Copland eliminated an icon of the Popular Front, as well as an American folk tale that foregrounded the plight of labour, particularly black labour, in American history; the exploitation of black labour, indeed, was a dangerous theme at the outset of the Cold War.

If the exclusion of John Henry from the collection is an eloquent element in understanding Copland's choices, equally significant is the late inclusion of the song 'Zion's Walls', taken from George Pullen Jackson's collection *Down East Spirituals*, because Jackson was a judge for, an intellectual luminary and performer at the White Top Folk Festival, and his work as a folk collector in many ways aligns with the festival's racial politics. In his work, Jackson even went so far as to locate the origins of the spiritual tradition in the British Isles: although the Afro-American spiritual was the best known, the musicologist wanted to acknowledge its Anglo-Saxon roots, going so far as to assert that Afro-Americans "had made British and Baptist music their own", thus upsetting the view given in 1934 article *Negro Revolutionary Music* by left-wing journalist Richard Frank:

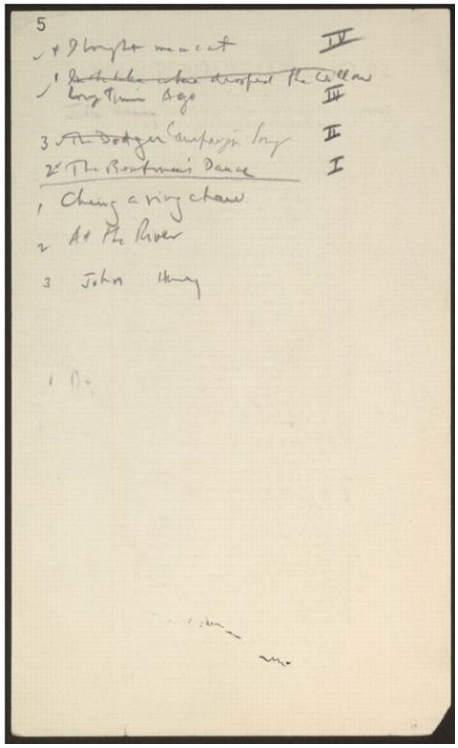


Figure 3: Sketch from Old American Songs, First Set, Aaron Copland Collection
Library of Congress

[5] *Ivi*, p. 323.
[6] SCHATZ, P. *Songs of the Negro Worker*, "New Masses 5", n. 12, May 1930, p. 7.

> While it is the music of an oppressed people, [African American music] still possesses such virility that it has an irresistible attraction for ruling-class whites, […] who for generations in one form or another have made Negro music their own.[7]

But the contemporary historical-political context convinced Copland not only to reformulate the *Old American Songs* through his choice of melodies, but also to make several textual changes that contributed to reframe the pieces: an approach taken by the musician right from the elaboration of the very title of the collections. What were initially called *Three American Folk Melodies* or *Folk Trilogy*, through the erasure of the term 'folk', soon became the *Old American Songs*. The works thus sidestepped the thorny implications of 'folk' — and its popular front associations. Reference model for the new title was the score of the *Harris Collection of Poetry and Plays*, which were described on the frontispiece as *50 Old American Songs (1759-1858)*. By conceiving the cycle as a series of 'Old American' songs, Copland thus came to evoke an imagined and idealised common American past "that transcended traditional distinctions between urban 'popular' and rural 'folk' songs, and that ultimately left the tensions of both Copland's time and the imagined past unspoken".[8]

Copland made several significant textual changes to songs, nullifying their political charge. This is the case, for example, of 'The Dodger', written as a campaign song, that originally included seven verses: Copland's final setting includes only three, those about the candidate, the preacher, and the lover. The composer decided to omit the social figures of the doctor, the merchant, the lawyer, and the peasant so as not to risk being accused of comparing the economic situation of the country man to that of his richer, stingier neighbours.

So, in general, several of the *Old American Songs* were modified or musically transformed in ways that allowed Copland to neutralise potential political commentary. For this Kassandra Hartford wrote:

> The *Old American Songs* do not celebrate the American "folk" and the promise of their ethnic pluralism celebrated by the Left in the Popular Front era. Rather, they present a remarkably homogeneous vision of an idealized American past, unmarred by the messy conflicts of Copland's present. Copland erases the history of manual labor and laborers […]. He excises texts that highlight economic inequality and exploitation. […] In its final version, *Old American Songs* reflects upon an American past that is predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and from which class conflict and ethnic tension have been erased. They tell us much about Copland's vision of how a politically neutral "common man" for the Cold War might sound.[9]

Fiddle-I-Fee, an otherwise traditional nonsense song

'I Bought Me a Cat' is the fifth and last piece in the first set of Aaron Copland's *Old American Songs.* As the author declared, "this version of this children's nonsense song was sung to the composer by the American playwright Lynn Riggs, who learned it during his boyhood in Oklahoma".[10]

This piece is a whimsical children's music in the style of 'Old MacDonald', with a single verse repeating and adding a new animal and its call with each iteration. This compositional form, the catalogue song, was defined and analysed in a brilliant essay by Roger Renwick, *Recentering Anglo/American Folksong: Sea Crabs and Wicked Youths*.[11] According to the

[7] FRANK, R. *Negro Revolutionary Music*, *New Masses 11*, n. 7, May 1934, p. 29.
[8] Hartford, *op.cit.*, p. 327
[9] *Ivi*, p. 341.
[10] COPLAND, A. *Old American Songs: First and Second Sets*. Boosey & Hawkes, London. 1952. p. 2.
[11] RENWICK, R. *Recentering Anglo/American Folksong: Sea Crabs and Wicked Youths*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson. 2001, pp. 59-91

musicologist, these are very often, as in this case, cumulative songs, meaning that an element of chorus is added to each additional verse (in this sense they can serve as tests of memory and/or endurance for their performers); delimited in time and space (whether in the past or the present, the piece focuses on a farm and its inhabitants), they do not have a story or development, which is why the order of the verses is of little importance for the purposes of the narrative; their structure is highly redundant due to the large number of repetitions, which leave little room for elements of change between one stanza and the next: thus it is possible to understand the course of the entire piece by listening to only one or two verses.

Also called 'Farmyard Song', 'I Bought Me a Cat' is a cumulative song about farm animals originating in the British Isles and known in North America in several variants and under different titles, including 'I Love My Rooster', 'I Bought Me a Horse', 'My Cock Crew', 'The Green Tree', 'The Barnyard Song', and 'There Was an Old Man of Tobago'.

Precisely because of its numerous antecedents, from a philological point of view this song presents an interesting problem: since Copland learnt it from the playwright Lynn Riggs, there is no way to identify the version used by the musician. What can be said, however, is that this nonsense song is found in many other sources. To trace the New York composer's model, we cannot fail to note the similarities between Copland's piece and *Bought Me a Cat* published in 1948 by Ruth Crawford Seeger in the book *American Folk Songs for Children* and recorded in 1953 on a studio album of the same name by her stepson, Pete Seeger. Even though one can tell this version is a variant of the one employed by Copland - similar words, structure, cumulative aspect, and melodic properties yet - there are both melodic and lyric differences between the two. It is true that Copland states his source as emanating from Oklahoma, while the Seeger variant originates in Arkansas. The lyrics of the song published by Copland in 1950 read:

I bought me a cat, my cat pleased me,
I fed my cat under yonder tree.
My cat says fiddle eye fee.

I bought me a duck, my duck pleased me,
I fed my duck under yonder tree.
My duck says "Quaa, quaa",
My cat says fiddle eye fee.

I bought me a goose, my goose pleased me,
I fed my goose under yonder tree.
My goose says "Quaw, quaw",
My duck says. . .

I bought me a hen; my hen pleased me.
I fed my hen under yonder tree.
My hen says "Shimmy-shack, shimmy- shack",
My goose says. . .

I bought me a pig; my pig pleased me.
I fed my pig under yonder tree.
My pig says "Griffey, griffey".
My hen, says. . .

I bought me a cow; my cow pleased me.
I fed my cow under yonder tree.
My cow says "Moo, moo",
My pig says . . .

I bought me a horse; my horse pleased me.
I fed my horse under yonder tree.
My horse says "Neigh, neigh",
My cow says. . .

I bought me a wife; my wife pleased me.
I fed my wife under yonder tree.
My wife says "Honey, honey",
My horse says "Neigh, neigh".

Sequencing the list of animals bought by the farmer, it cannot escape the reader that the last 'animal' mentioned is a wife. A phrase born out of a patriarchal view of society, 'I bought me a wife' educated, through what was supposed to be an innocent children's song, to look upon the 'women of the house' as the most important species of domesticated animal, which men could buy and feed under a tree on a par with any farmyard beast. This is not an invention of the composer: this verse appears in several earlier versions of the song, including that one by Ruth Crawford Seeger, who wrote:

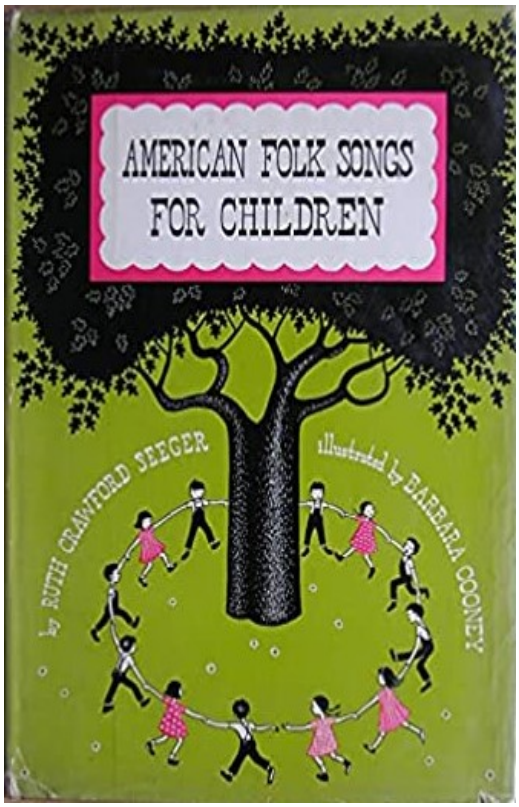


Figure 4: R. C. SEEGER, *American Folk Songs for Children*, illustrated by B. Cooney, Doubleday & Company, N. Y. 1948.

I bought me a woman; the woman pleased me.
I fed my woman under yonder tree.
The woman went "Honey, honey",
The horse went 'Neigh'…

After this stanza Crawford Seeger's version featured an additional verse, which is absent from Copland's song, where the protagonist told of having bought a 'baby'. This version was retained by Pete Seeger for the 1953 recording, with the only difference that he reversed the two final stanzas.

The lyrics remained almost unchanged for several years, until it was probably realised that the message conveyed by that 'I bought me a wife/woman/baby' was particularly inappropriate. Numerous authors therefore decided to modify it by finding alternative solutions that would give the song a different meaning without subverting the compositional-musical character of the original song.

A new interpretation of this popular American children's music was given, for example, in 1979 by Diane Stanley, who published an illustrated version entitled *Fiddle-I-Fee: A Traditional American Chant*. The author decided to place at the centre of the story a little red-haired girl who, together with her cat, in the stillness of a starry night decides to cook and serve a dinner in her treehouse for her animal friends: a cat, a hen, a pig, a dog, a sheep, a turkey, a cow and a horse, all masked for the party.

In March 1988 Paul Galdone produced an illustrated version of *Cat Goes Fiddle-I-Fee* where, in addition to replacing the traditional 'bought' with 'had', as Stanley had done before him, following the last verse-refrain introducing the dog he added a few lines that departed from the logic of the catalogue song, and which were useful for giving a sense of conclusion to the text by introducing a whole new character:

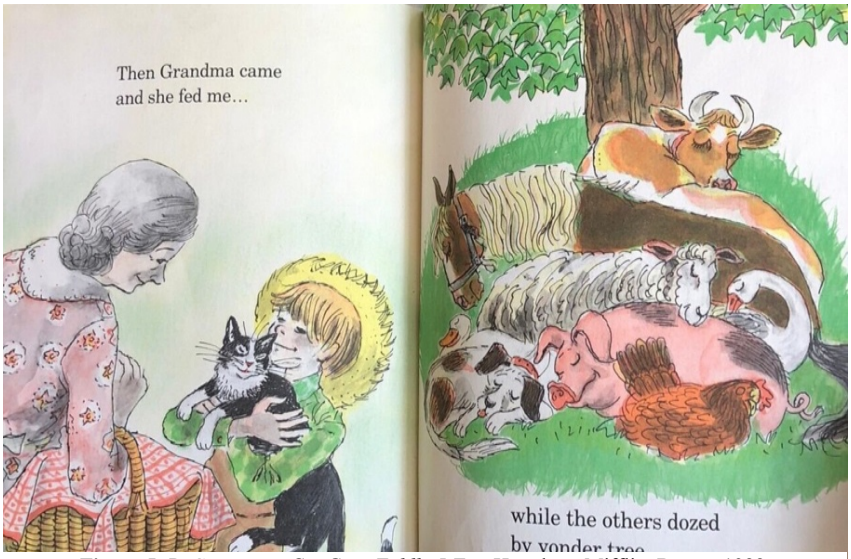


Figure 5: P. GALDONE, *Cat Goes Fiddle-I-Fee*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1988.

> […] Then Grandma came
> And she fed me…
> While the others dozed
> By yonder tree.
> And cat went fiddle-i-fee.

The illustrations created by Galdone himself clearly show that the narrator of the story is a young boy who, after feeding all the animals of the farm, can enjoy a good meal when his grandmother arrives.

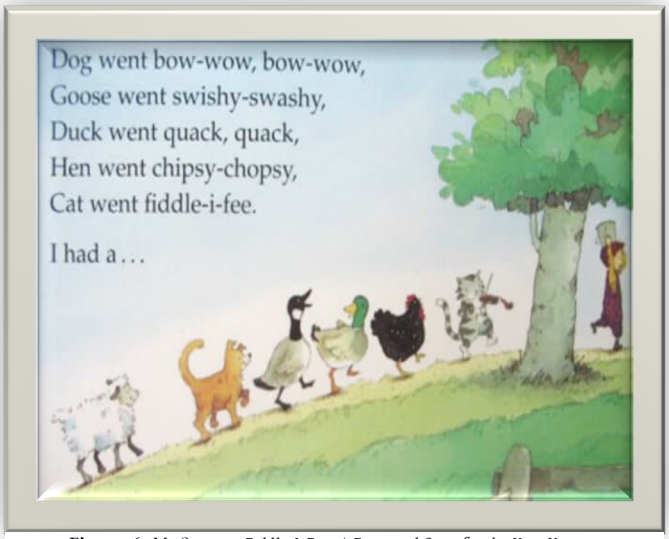


Figure 6: M. SWEET, *Fiddle-I-Fee: A Farmyard Song for the Very Young*, Little Brown & Co, Boston 1992.

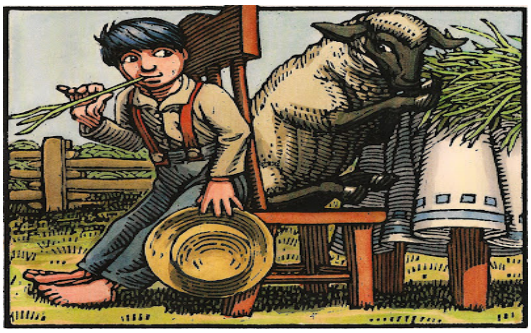


Figure 7: C. MANSON, *A Farmyard Song*, North-South, N. Y. 1992.

Different is the illustrated version published by Melissa Sweet in 1992 under the title *Fiddle-I-Fee: A Farmyard Song for the Very Young*. A playful interpretation of this folk song features a young boy leading a growing parade of animals: with a food bucket under his arm and followed by his fiddle-playing cat, the boy gathers and leads the way for the procession across a stream, on top of a fence, through meadows and woods. Once they all get on a cart behind the farmer's tractor, they finally find themselves having a big picnic around the table together. Also, in this case the words are sung by a child, who enumerates the animals he 'had' and the characters of the wife/woman and the baby have been removed from the song, which ends instead with the verse dedicated to the cow. Also published in the same year was *A Farmyard Song* by Christopher Manson, where this old rhyme is renewed accompanied by folk art woodcuts illustrating the young protagonist who, by feeding the farm cattle, introduces each animal and its sound.

Singular, if not unique, finally, is the interpretation of *Fiddle-I-Fee* given in 2001 by Will Hillenbrand. According to tradition, the song opens with the verse dedicated to the cat:

> I had a cat,
> My cat pleased me,
> I fed my cat under yonder tree.
> My cat plays fiddle-i-fee. […]

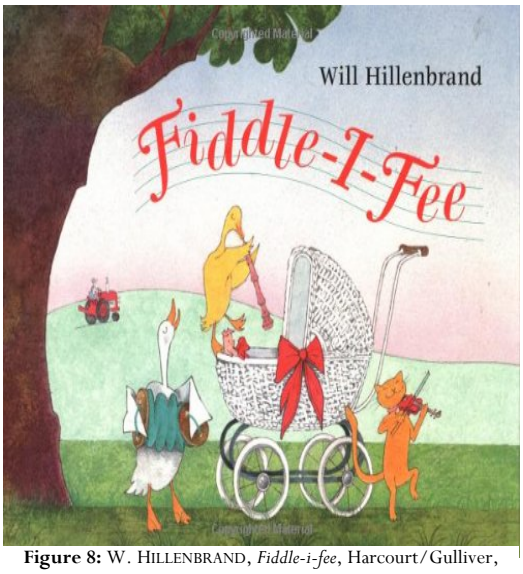


Figure 8: W. HILLENBRAND, *Fiddle-i-fee*, Harcourt/Gulliver, San Diego, 2001.

A peculiar aspect of this cumulative and nonsense song are the non-characteristic sounds of the barnyard, which mingle with those familiar to the many children accustomed to *Old MacDonald*. But the innovative aspect is that Hillenbrand has decided, by making minor changes to the text of the previous versions (in particular by using the verb 'to play' instead of the traditional 'to say' or 'to go'), to introduce the various inhabitants of the stable as animal-musicians, who gradually join their sound in an out-and-out symphony of onomatopoeias: the 'quaa-quaa' of the duck-oboist, the 'hum-summ' of the goose's concertina, the 'cimmy-chuk, cimmy-chuck' of the hen's washboard, the 'griffy-griffy' of the pig's harmonica, the 'strum-strum' of the cow playing the banjo, the 'dub-dub' of the horse's bass, and so on. At the same time, the illustrations show a couple of peasants who, as the months go by, carry out their chores (including feeding the cattle under the tree) waiting for the birth of their baby, at the arrival of which, in conclusion, the animals all play a moonlight concert together to celebrate the happy event. Hillenbrand therefore decides to re-propose the figures of the wife and child according to a very different interpretation from that of tradition, which presented the two characters as mere elements in a list of the farmer's possessions.

Figure 9: A. COPLAND, *I bought me a cat*, in *Old American Songs: First and Second Sets*, Boosey & Hawkes, London 1952.

From a musical point of view, however, 'I bought me a cat' is a strophic song, where Copland leaves the soloist the opportunity to impersonate the various animals while the accompaniment simulates barnyard sounds of the cat, duck, goose, hen, pig, horse, and cow.

As we can see from the score, this song playfully depicts the sounds of the various animals in the text: both in the vocal part and in the instrumental accompaniment where, in correspondence to the verse of some animals we note that Copland uses melodic and harmonic clashes. He inserts, for example, a minor second clash on the duck's 'quaa-quaa', and the goose's 'quaw-quaw', creating a funny dissonance.

It is also interesting to note that, as in other *Old American Songs* Copland, while adhering closely to the original folk melody, inserts just enough metre and tempo changes to make his music unique and sustain the audience's interest. A particular example of metre change occurs right in 'I bought me a cat', where each verse begins in 2/4 metre, changes to 3/4 metre at the animal response, and returns to 2/4 for the conclusive punchline 'my cat says fiddle-eye-fee'. The resulting uneven rhythmic flow creates an element of surprise that makes this song very dynamic and effective.

Figure 10: A. COPLAND, *I bought me a cat*, in *Old American Songs: First and Second Sets*, Boosey & Hawkes, London 1952.

Aaron Copland's composition also differs from other farmyard songs in its musical articulation: although the lyrics are highly repetitive, as in any catalogue song, from a sonic point of view the song is animated by a continuous crescendo. As the number of animals listed by the farmer increases, so does the complexity of the musical writing (although it remains a simple children's song): after the first three stanzas accompanied by a few simple chords, in the fourth verse some acciaccaturas are added to the bass line to enrich and enliven the trend of the piece. As the music progresses, the chords and those long pauses that interspersed them at the beginning of the composition develop into groups of notes (quaver and semiquaver) that make the song increasingly singable. The animal verses are the only part of the verse that is proposed identical to itself in every repetition: composed almost exclusively of chords, only in the last verse they are dissolved into groups of dotted sixteenths, which, in line with the crescendo of the dynamics (which reaches '*fff*' in the last bars), lend liveliness and verve to the conclusion 'my cat says fiddle-eye-fee'. This ever-increasing sound is even more pronounced when listening to the orchestral version of the piece: we hear a progressive accumulation not only of farm animals but also of musical instruments, witnessing what we might call a 'bolero effect'.

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