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KYLE GANN (b. 1955)
Custer and Sitting Bull

Custer and Sitting Bull (1995–99) 35:14

1. Scene 1: Custer: “If I Were an Indian . . .” 8:41
2. Scene 2: Sitting Bull: “Do You Know Who I Am?” 8:17
3. Scene 3: Sun Dance/Battle of the Greasy-Grass River 8:02
4. Scene 4: Custer’s Ghost to Sitting Bull 10:08
Kyle Gann, voice & electronics

5. *So Many Little Dyings* (1994) 6:55
Kenneth Patchen, voice; Kyle Gann, sampling keyboard

6. *Scenario* (2003–4) 17:05
Martha Herr, voice; Kyle Gann, electronics

TT: 59:27



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KYLE GANN



CUSTER AND SITTING BULL

This recording features three works by Kyle Gann—*Custer and Sitting Bull*, *Scenario*, and *So Many Little Dyings*, from the decade 1994 to 2004. Those familiar with Gann’s music will recognize a commitment to just intonation (alternate tunings), paired with a deployment of unexpected meters, often set to frequently shifting tempos. But here we also encounter another side of Gann, a composer preoccupied with texts, the inherent rhythms found within the spoken word, and the dramatic potential of these texts (including poems, interviews, stories, speeches, and even one psychic transmission). In the case of *Custer and Sitting Bull* (1995–99), presented here in an updated version, the composition is additionally a theatrical, staged work, carrying with it an extensive performance and reception history.

A musical reflection on the historic encounter between Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and the Lakota leader Sitting Bull, *Custer and Sitting Bull* is an example of a “pocket opera,” a kind of one-person opera that blossomed in the unfunded spaces of Downtown Manhattan. From 1999 to 2007 Gann performed it live himself, narrating the drama using various historical texts set to a MIDI keyboard accompaniment tuned to just intonation (ranging from 20 to 31-note-to-the-octave scales). While it takes the form of reimagined American history, *Custer* is perhaps most centrally about the value of sustained, repeated listening. Indeed, Gann’s use of just intonation not only rewards but arguably requires many hearings to access certain subtleties. Upon first hearing *Custer*, for instance, a listener might detect that the first scene gradually becomes increasingly dissonant. In fact, by design, Gann employed two simultaneous major-minor scales (major-minor C and major-minor D^Λ), separated by a near-quarter-tone relationship. As the composer explains, these scales are employed to reveal Custer’s multiple and conflicting selves:

Where [Custer] sustains a rational view of the contrast between White and Indian cultures, the music flows

smoothly from one scale to the other. Where he takes up the White man’s intolerant bias, the music adheres rigidly to the C scale. And where Custer expresses a deep, unconscious ambivalence, hypocritically blaming the Indian for sinister White actions, the two scales conflict with each other and undercut Custer’s ostensive meaning. The scale, divided against itself, reflects Custer’s deeply divided personality.¹

Gann’s complex design can be perceived, but it takes time to hear Custer’s multiply divided personalities in this way. The reward, however, is not only a musical one; in *Custer*, Gann offers a worthwhile reminder that all individuals “contain multitudes,” as Walt Whitman’s oft-quoted “Song of Myself” tells us. It’s a difficult notion to comprehend, yet alone perceive, so it bears repeating: People contain multitudes. With this complex and ambitious work, drawing upon Gann’s own multiple selves—composer, performer, critic, historian, and theorist—*Custer and Sitting Bull* contains multitudes, as well.

Written in four scenes, *Custer and Sitting Bull* begins with the autobiographical text *My Life on the Plains*, in which Custer (voiced by Gann) admires the scenery “from the Missouri River to the base of the Rocky Mountains,” before musing, “If I were an Indian . . .” and imagines the life of a Native American in broad and generalized terms. Gann’s music reinforces Custer’s stereotypical mode by setting his text to a steady pulse of drums, a sonic stereotype of Native American music. Mid-scene, the music shifts, and Gann conjures his inner Charles Ives, quoting the tune “Garry Owen,” which is constructed over numerous repetitions. The official song of Custer’s cavalry regiment, it was used during the 1868 Washita River massacre, where Custer reported killing over a hundred Cheyenne warriors. In truth, however, Custer actually slaughtered mostly women, children, and elders.

¹ Kyle Gann, “Tuning for ‘Custer: If I Were an Indian,’” available on the composer’s website: <http://www.kylegann.com/Custune2.html>

The tune—an Irish drinking song—is quoted at length and accelerates eventually into chaos. The quick juxtaposition of narrated horror (“all that was left of the village were a few heaps of blackened ashes”) followed by a jovial drinking song is both confusing and sickening; perhaps one could only drink such sins away. After the Garry Owen tune concludes, the scene ends with Custer denying many of the charges leveled against him, with his plea summarized with the repeated line: “Judge me not by what is known now, but in the light of what I knew when these events transpired.”

The second scene “Sitting Bull: Do You Know Who I Am?” comes from the perspective of Sitting Bull, with texts taken from disparate parts of the chief’s life, including interviews, speeches, songs, and other transcribed or attributed texts. Like Custer’s texts, the words of Sitting Bull reveal a complex man who could also contradict himself. Instead of the caricatured steady drumbeat heard in the first scene, Sitting Bull’s speech is often set here in a lilted 2 + 3 rhythmic setting, and the scene concludes with another song quotation, this time attributed to Sitting Bull: “No chance for me to live, Mother / You might as well mourn / My father has given me this nation / In protecting them I have a hard time.”²

In quasi-symphonic form, the third scene is a dance movement, “Sun Dance / Battle of the Greasy Grass River” and depicts the days before the famous Battle of the Little Bighorn (the river was called Greasy Grass by the Sioux). Before the battle, Sitting Bull performed a Sun Dance, sacrificing strips of flesh from his body. Then, in a vision, Sitting Bull saw white soldiers falling and heard a voice that said: “I give you these because they have no ears.” Sitting Bull’s text is intoned by Gann in low and slowly declaimed words. In contrast, Custer’s short and choppy text is taken from dictated speech during his final battle, “Come on—big village—be quick—bring packs. P. S. Bring packs,” which is musically marked

² According to Gann’s score, the song and text come from Stanley Vestal, *Sitting Bull: Champion of the Sioux* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).

by the militaristic sound of tightly tuned snare drums. Soon, the two men’s styles begin to alternate rapidly, each in its own tempo—Custer’s cavalry music at 108 beats per minute and the Sioux music at 84—as though battling musically. The conflict eventually gives way to the stasis of extended drones.

The final scene “Custer’s Ghost to Sitting Bull” is the strangest, as its text has a complicated transmission: It contains the spoken words of Custer’s ghost, which were posthumously spoken to Sitting Bull, whose spirit was channeled by the modern-day psychic Martin Shulman, who printed the text in his 1975 book *Karmic Astrology*. The ghost of Custer intones words both conciliatory (“you and I were once brothers and will be brothers again”) and exculpatory (“we have done as we were told.”)

This idiosyncratic text offers a reminder about the nature of Gann’s drama. While the composer immersed himself in historical research during the composition of his one-man opera, *Custer and Sitting Bull* is a dramatic musical work, not an academic nor an ethnomusicological one.³ Like other minimalists who came before him—Reich’s study of Ghanaian drumming, Glass’s work with Ravi Shankar, and La Monte Young’s discipleship with Pandit Pran Nath—Gann looked outside the Western classical tradition for inspiration as a composer, not as a documentarian.⁴

³ The “Sun Dance” movement of *Custer*, for instance, uses a war song “I have conquered them,” transcribed by Frances Densmore (1867–1957), who recorded a Teton Sioux named *Ina’la-wica* (Lone Man), who fought alongside Sitting Bull. For her transcription, see Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music* (Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institution, 1918), 142.

While she was a pioneer of comparative musicology, Densmore’s work has been criticized for optimizing songs for recording quality. On Densmore’s history and her recording method, in which she would “secure the best songs, sung in the desired manner,” see Roshanak Kheshti, *Modernity’s Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 27.

⁴ Gann’s interest in Native American song and dance originated in the late 1970s. Over his years of study, Gann collected dozens of records of Native American performances and hundreds of mp3s, many of which he studied through the process of transcription. He also experienced multiple pow-wows firsthand, visiting Hopi and Zuni reservations in New Mexico and Arizona in the 1980s and 90s. Gann also conducted further study at the American Indian Center of Chicago. See Gann, interview with Libby Van Cleve, OHAM, 96–97. Gann, correspondence with author (June 5, 2018).

The composer's task in *Custer and Sitting Bull*, then, was less one of strict historical preservation than the crafting of a compelling musical drama—the portrayal of two historic men, both with complex, multivalent, and self-contradictory personalities. In so doing, Gann offered a timely, perhaps timeless, commentary on the countless, contradictory selves a person can contain within oneself—musically, historically, and otherwise.

When Gann first toured *Custer* in 1999–2001, he often paired it with a sampler piece, *So Many Little Dyings* (1994). The title is taken from the Kenneth Patchen poem “And What with the Blunders” (from *First Will & Testament*, 1939), and Gann wrote the work during the summer of 1994, while grieving the passing of his mother-in-law. As the composer explained in an interview, Patchen was a favorite poet, whose work helped Gann through numerous depressive episodes.⁵ The closing line of Patchen's poem forms the centerpiece of the composition: “There are so many little dyings that it doesn't matter which of them is death.”

The entire work originates from the pitch and rhythm of Patchen's spoken voice, which Gann sampled and transcribed from a recorded recitation of the poem.⁶ Listening to it, however, one might not perceive this borrowing immediately, as the work begins with the sound of a microtonal toy piano imitating the rhythms and contours of Patchen's voice. Very slowly, over the course of the 7-minute work, the piano's melody is taken over by a recording of Patchen's sampled voice. When performed live, as he did on his *Custer* tours, Gann played this entire work from a sampler, in which he would trigger the sounds of running water, bird songs, tam-tams, and the poet's voice. In its recorded version, the work concludes gradually and fades slowly from bird song into silence.

⁵ Ibid., 113.

⁶ “And What with the Blunders,” *Selected Poems of Kenneth Patchen Read by Kenneth Patchen* (Folkways FW 09717, 1959).

Gann's *Scenario*, for soprano and virtual orchestra, was written between 2003–2004 but wasn't performed live until 2012. The text is taken from a 1932 S. J. Perelman story of the same name, which consists of a non-stop, breathless collage of filmic clichés. On the page, Perelman's text continues for pages without paragraph break and includes dialogue excerpts, Hollywood rumors, and behind-the-scenes film directions. In Gann's setting of it—what he calls “a surrealist collage opera, the musical analogue of an animated cartoon, for theatrical soprano and virtual orchestra”—each collaged portion is set in a corresponding style and character, so the soprano must alternate rapidly between each affect and singing style throughout the 17-minute work.⁷

Sometimes such a challenging composition can write itself into obscurity. Fortunate for Gann, soprano Martha Herr was more than up to the task and premiered the work in 2012. She began her career with the Creative Associates at SUNY Buffalo, and performed many premieres within the United States and Brazil, including Morton Feldman's opera *Neither* and John Cage's *EUROPERA V*. Herr, who recently passed away in 2015, will be remembered for her vocal agility and stylistic dexterity, which is luckily preserved in her recorded performance of Gann's *Scenario*.⁸

When *Custer's Ghost: The Electronic Music of Kyle Gann* was first released as an album in 1999, Gann had just begun touring *Custer and Sitting Bull* as a one-man show after five years of composing and designing the piece (1995–99).⁹ In its second performance (of dozens to follow), Gann took two movements of *Custer* (the first and last) to Merkin Hall in February 1998, where Paul Griffiths found Gann's use of just intonation well-suited to the topic. Griffiths described the “verbal

⁷ Gann, notes on *Scenario*, available online: <http://www.kylegann.com/Scenario.html>

⁸ Gann, “Even the Most Brilliant Musicians are Mortal,” *PostClassical* (November 8, 2015).

⁹ Kyle Gann, *Custer's Ghost: The Electronic Music of Kyle Gann* (Monroe Street, MSM 60104 1999), liner notes by Jason Stanyek.

affront” of seeing Gann recite the abhorrent words of Custer: “the spectacle of seeing a gentle musician mouthing these sentiments is shocking, and takes away the trust one generally has in words spoken from the stage.”¹⁰ But such mistrust felt familiar at the time, according to Griffiths. (This was just weeks after news broke about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.) In “this world of absent trust,” Griffiths wrote, “where we have to consider every particle of what is said, try to place it in some coherent system, and cannot do so—is beautifully suited to the bent, ambiguous progressions, harmonics, and melodic shapes of Mr. Gann’s computer music.”¹¹

Early the next year, Gann gave the full premiere of *Custer* at the CalArts Musical Explorations festival in February 1999. Perhaps perplexed by the work and struggling to characterize it in terms of music and genre, one critic for the *Los Angeles Times* called *Custer* “wonderfully peculiar” and a “tight singspiel narrative.”¹² Gann himself has called it both an “electronic opera” and a “one-man music theater piece.”¹³ From there, Gann took *Custer* on the road in 1999–2000, performing around the U.S., including Ohio’s Oberlin Conservatory, Seattle’s Cornish College of the Arts, San Francisco’s Center for New Music and Audio Technology, and concluded the year in downtown New York City on a four-evening, double-billed concert at the Kitchen, paired with Phil Kline’s *Into the Fire*.¹⁴

In bringing *Custer and Sitting Bull* to the Kitchen, Gann brought *Custer* downtown—a musical scene he’d not only been actively composing within, but

had also been chronicling and theorizing through his writings in *The Village Voice* for over a decade, since 1986. To theorize downtown music, then, Gann had to also theorize himself, providing a kind of musical self-diagnosis. Describing the totalists, for instance, Gann explained that these composers, “born in the 1950s” (like Gann), wrote in “a style based in minimalism’s limitations in pitch material, but using minimalist patterns as a springboard for considerable rhythmic and tempo complexity” (like Gann), and were drawn to vernacular and non-Western classical musics (like Gann, somewhat).¹⁵ Indeed, in Allan Kozinn’s hearing of *Custer*, the critic detected some pop music inflections in Gann’s Kitchen performance, including hints of the baritone voice of Jim Morrison and the defiant declamations of Frank Zappa.¹⁶

Beyond shared musical resemblances, in Gann’s formulation, downtown music was a site-specific phenomenon, revolving around lower-Manhattan venues, of which the Kitchen in Chelsea is a beacon (and birthplace to the premieres of downtown classics like Julius Eastman’s *The Holy Presence of Joan d’Arc*, Meredith Monk’s *Dolmen Music*, and Steve Reich’s *Work in Progress for 21 Musicians*).¹⁷

A few photographs remain from Gann’s 2000 Kitchen performance of *Custer and Sitting Bull*, and these photos reveal something that the recordings do not: They show Gann performing on stage, barefoot, hands outstretched in the air, declaiming his text, with an image of Sitting Bull projected behind him.¹⁸ Lest one forget, *Custer* is written as a theatrical, dramatic work. Indeed, Gann worked with theatrical coach Jeffrey Sichel to learn certain dramatic gestures and coordinated his musical work with movement, staging, and visual projections.¹⁹

¹⁰ Paul Griffiths, “Tuned to Sound Out of Tune,” *New York Times* (February 21, 1998), B12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Josef Woodard, “Ample Helping of Minimalist Fare,” *Los Angeles Times* (February 25, 1999), 161.

¹³ In a review of his Oberlin performance in 1999, one critic cites Gann calling it an “electronic cantata” and adds that his Oberlin performance was “an emotionally charged performance piece.” Emily Manzo, “Kyle Gann Fascinated Composers,” *Oberlin Review* 128, no. 10 (November 19, 1999). Gann later called it a “one-man music theater piece” in a 2008 blog post. Gann, “New Clothes for Custer,” *PostClassic* (September 8, 2008). http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2007/09/new_clothes_for_custer.html

¹⁴ A partial list of performances can be found on Gann’s website: <http://www.kylegann.com/Custernotes.html>

¹⁵ Gann, *Music Downtown: Writings from The Village Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Alan Kozinn, “Sound and Images Exploring the Elusiveness of Truth,” *New York Times* (December 12, 2000).

¹⁷ *Work in Progress for 21 Musicians* was the early working title of Reich’s *Music for 18 Musicians*.

¹⁸ Photos available online via Getty Images.

¹⁹ Gann, interview with Daniel Varela, *Perfect Sound Forever* (April 2004). Available online: <http://www.furious.com/perfect/kylegann.html>

In a 1999 interview, Gann emphasized the theatrical nature of *Custer*. At times during his performance, Gann explained, he was on his knees pleading, another moment lying in the fetal position, the next moment sitting cross-legged on the floor. He went on to describe the audience's reaction:

They can't believe a composer is doing this. Every eye in the house is on me. No one is sitting there, looking at their program. I just love doing it. But instead of the abstractness of doing most new music the way we do it, it's like doing a real storyteller-type thing. The audience is really sitting there. They're getting it. There's narrative. They don't want to miss a word. In some sense, they can't believe what you're doing. They can't believe you're becoming this character, and becoming that character with just the simplest gestures.²⁰

Luckily, that sense of suspense—the way the work's complex and tragic narrative can captivate an audience—is maintained in the updated version of *Custer and Sitting Bull*, presented here with new audio design by M.C. Maguire. Using Gann's original MIDI files, Maguire refitted the piece with new sounds and timbres. (The original 1999 version on Monroe Street Music featured sound design by Dale Hourlland.) Beyond the sound design, this updated version includes a new spoken performance by Gann, who, by the time of this new recording, had performed *Custer* dozens of times, so this new performance has the assuredness that comes with years of touring the work as a one-man band.²¹ —Kerry O'Brien

Kerry O'Brien is a musicologist and a percussionist living in Seattle, where she's an instructor at Cornish College of the Arts.

²⁰ Gann, interview with Libby Van Cleve, Yale University, Oral Histories of American Music (June 10, 1999). Major Figures in American Music, 297 a–j, transcript page 111.

²¹ Gann, "New Clothes for Custer," *PostClassic* (September 8, 2008). http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2007/09/new_clothes_for_custer.html

CUSTER AND SITTING BULL

Scene 1: Custer: "If I Were an Indian . . ."

In proceeding from the Missouri River to the base of the Rocky Mountains, the ascent, though gradual, is quite rapid. . . . Comparing the surface of the country to that of the ocean, . . . it does not require a very great stretch of the imagination, when viewing this boundless ocean of beautiful living verdure, to picture these successive undulations as gigantic waves, standing silent and immovable, and adding to the impressive grandeur of the scene. If the Indian were the innocent, simple-minded being he is represented, he would be just the character to complete the picture. [*My Life on the Plains*, pp. 5, 13]

If I were an Indian, I often think, I would greatly prefer to cast my lot among those of my people adhered to the free open plains rather than submit to the confined limits of a reservation, there to be the recipient of the blessed benefits of civilization, with its vices thrown in. . . . The Indian can never be permitted to view the question in this deliberate way. . . . When the soil which he has claimed and hunted over for so long a time is demanded by this . . . insatiable monster, there is no appeal; he must yield, or, like the car of Juggernaut, it will roll mercilessly over him, destroying as it advances. Destiny seems to have so willed it, and the world looks on and nods its approval. . . . Two hundred years ago it required millions to express in numbers the Indian population. Today, less than half the number of thousands will suffice. Where and why have they gone? Ask the Saxon race. . . . [*My Life on the Plains*, pp. 22–23]

We had approached so near the village that from the dead silence which reigned I feared the lodges were deserted. I was about to turn in my saddle and give the signal for attack, when a single rifle shot rang sharp and clear on the far side of the village. I turned to the band leader and directed him to give us "Garryowen." The bugle sounded the charge and the command dashed rapidly into the village. The

Indians were caught napping, but overcame their surprise, and quickly seized their rifles, bows, and arrows. Orders were given to prevent the killing of any but the fighting strength of the village, but in a struggle where the squaws are as dangerous as the warriors it is impossible to always discriminate. When everything had been collected the torch was applied, and soon, all that was left of the village were a few heaps of blackened ashes. [*My Life on the Plains*, pp. 240–241, 248]

Let Bacchus's sons be not dismayed,
And join with me each jovial blade,
Come booze and sing and lend your aid
To help me with the chorus.
So in place of water we'll drink ale
and pay the reckoning on the nail,
No man for debt shall go to jail
from Garry Owen in glory. [lyrics, "Garry Owen"]

My firm conviction based on analysis of the character traits of the Indian is that the Indian cannot be induced to adopt an unaccustomed mode of life by any teaching, argument, reasoning, or coaxing not followed closely by physical force. The Indian is capable of recognizing no influence but that of stern, arbitrary power. [*My Life on the Plains*, p. 148]

From Garry Owen in glory!

What was to become of all those women and children bereft of everything and of every friend? True, it was just. The warriors had brought this fate upon themselves and their families by their unprovoked attacks upon the White Man. . . . Although never claimed as an exponent of the peace policy, . . . yet I entertained the most peaceable sentiments toward all Indians who were in no condition to cause trouble. [*My Life on the Plains*, pp. 251–253]

If I were an Indian, I often think, I would greatly prefer to cast my lot among those of my people adhered to the free open plains rather than submit to the confined limits of a reservation. [*My Life on the Plains*, p. 22]

I have never been absent from my command without leave, as here charged.
I have never made use of my men for the advancement of my private interests, as here charged.

I have never turned away from our enemy, as here charged,
Or failed to relieve an imperiled friend, as here charged,
Or left unburied a single fallen man under my command, as here charged,
Or took upon myself the responsibility of a single action not demanded by the occasion, as here charged.

[from Custer's defense at his 1867 court-martial, quoted in Lawrence A. Frost, *The Court-Martial of General George Armstrong Custer*, p. 236]

Judge me not by what is known now, but in the light of what I knew when these events transpired. [adapted from Custer's defense at his 1867 court-martial, quoted in Lawrence A. Frost, *The Court-Martial of General George Armstrong Custer*, p. 217]

Where and why have they gone? Ask the Saxon race. . . . [*My Life on the Plains*, p. 23]

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Lawrence A. Frost. *The Court-Martial of General George Armstrong Custer*. University of Oklahoma Press (Norman, OK: 1968)

Scene 2: Sitting Bull: "Do You Know Who I Am?"

I am no chief.

I am a man. I see. I know.

I began to see when I was not yet born; when I was not in my mother's arms, but inside of my mother's belly.

It was there that I began to study about my people.
God gave me the power to see out of the womb.
The [Great Spirit] must have told me at that time that I would be the man to be the
judge of all the other Indians—a big man, to decide for them in all their ways.
I speak. It is enough.
I never taught my people to trust Americans.
I have told them the truth—that the Americans are great liars.
I have never dealt with the Americans. Why should I?
The land belonged to my people.
[*New York Herald*, November 16, 1877]

Of course I will speak to you if you desire me to do so.
I suppose it is only such men as you desire to speak who must say something.
Do you recognize me?
Any man who desires to speak . . . shall talk for [the Indians].
Do you know who I am. . . ?
. . . *Sitting Bull.*
[But] do you know who I am?
Slightly recumbent gentleman cow.
[But] do you know who I am?
I do not know any difference between you and the other Indians at this agency.
I am here by the will of the Great Spirit, and by his will I am a chief.
My heart is red and sweet, and I know it is sweet, because whatever passes near
me puts out its tongue to me.
[Senate Committee, Standing Rock Agency, August, 1883]
If a man is a chief, and has authority, he should be proud, and consider himself a
great man.
[Stanley Vestal, *Sitting Bull*]

And yet you men have come here to talk with us, and you do not know who I am.
If the Great Spirit has chosen any one to be the chief of this country it is myself.
You have conducted yourself like men who have been drinking whiskey, and I
came here to give you some advice.
I have always been a chief, and have been made chief of all the land.
Thirty-two years ago I was present at the [Fort Rice] council with the white man. . . .
Since then a great many questions have been asked me about it, and I always said, Wait.
Then the Black Hills council was held, and they asked me to give up that land,
and I said. . . wait.
I remember well all the promises that were made about that land. . . .
You white men advise us to follow your ways, and therefore I talk as I do.
When you have a piece of land, and anything trespasses on it, you catch and keep
it until you get damages, and I am doing the same thing now.
And I want you to tell this to the Great Father for me.
I am looking into the future for the benefit of my children, and . . . I want my
country taken care of for me.
[to the Senate Committee, Standing Rock Agency, August, 1883]
My father has given me this nation,
In protecting them I have a hard time.
No chance for me to live, Mother,
You might as well mourn.
[songs, recorded in Stanley Vestal, *Sitting Bull*]
Indians! There are no Indians left but me.
[when asked how the Indians felt about having sold the Black Hills, recorded in
Stanley Vestal, *Sitting Bull*]

Scene 3: Sun Dance/Battle of the Greasy-Grass River

Come on, be quick! Big Village. Bring packs, P.S. Bring packs.

[last note written by Custer at the Little Bighorn]

Scene 4: Custer's Ghost to Sitting Bull

[On June 25, 1876, 263 men—most of them under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer—were killed by American Indian forces under Sitting Bull at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, known to the Indians as the Greasy Grass River. Before the battle, Sitting Bull performed a Sun Dance, in which he cut notches of flesh from his arms and legs, letting the blood run down until he had a vision. And the vision Sitting Bull had was of cavalry and white soldiers falling down, as a voice said, “I give you these because they have no ears.”

After the battle, Sitting Bull visited the battlefield, where, according to a Lakota Sioux tradition, the ghost of George Armstrong Custer appeared to him, and spoke the following words:]

The white man would cover the earth and neither you nor I nor the Great Spirit Himself can stop the infiltration and bloodshed that will follow.

We are but one act in the play and we have done as we were told.

In less than fifteen years we will both be on the same side.

Within fifteen years a treacherous act by a white man will take place against you. You will have no foreknowledge of it and no medicine you could make would prevent it.

The white man sees only white and the day will come when he will try to extinguish all men who are not white from the face of the earth.

Know in your heart that I speak truth, for you and I were once brothers and will be brothers again.

Be relieved of your burden, for man is an angry wolf stalking and tracking down his prey from the beginning of time to the ends of all time but you and I are more than men as men know men.

Go now and be with your people.

They need you more now than before.

I will be with you many times when you light your pipe at night and I will be with you in your final hour as you are here with me now.

I GIVE YOU THESE BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO EARS.

I GIVE YOU THESE BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO EARS.

Adapted from Martin Schulman, *Karmic Astrology* (Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1975)

So Many Little Dyings

. . . there are so many little dyings that it doesn't matter which of them is death.

—Kenneth Patchen

"And what with the blunders" By Kenneth Patchen, from COLLECTED POEMS OF KENNETH PATCHEN, copyright © 1952 by Kenneth Patchen. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

SCENARIO

Fade in, exterior grassy knoll, long shot. Above the scene the thundering measures of Von Suppé's "Light Cavalry Overture." Austerlitz? The Plains of Abraham? Vicksburg? The Little Big Horn? Cambrai? Steady on, old son; it is Yorktown. Under a blood-red setting sun yon proud crest is Cornwallis. Blood and 'ouns, proud sirrah, does brush so lightly past an exciseman of the Crown? Lady Rotogravure's powdered shoulders shrank from the highwayman's caress; what, Jermyn, footpads on Hounslow Heath? A certain party in the D.A.'s office will hear of this, you bastard. . . . Leave go that lady or I'll smear yuh. . . . Me, whose ancestors scuttled stately India merchantmen of their comfits and silken stuffs and careened their piratical craft in the Dry Tortugas to carouse with bumboat women till the cock crew? Yuh'll buy my booze or I'll give yuh a handful of clouds. Me, whose ancestors rode with Yancey, Jeb Stuart, and Joe Johnston through the dusty bottoms of the Chickamauga? Oceans of love, but not one cent for tribute. . . . One side,

damn your black hide, suh, or Ah'll send one mo' dirty Litvak to the boneyard. It's right up the exhibitor's alley, Mr. Biberman, and you got to hand it to them on a platter steaming hot. I know, Stanley, but let's look at this thing reasonable; we been showing the public Folly Larrabee's drawers two years and they been cooling off. Jeez Crize—it's a hiSTORical drama, Mr. Biberman, it'll blow 'em outa the back of the houses, it's the greatest thing in the industry, it's dynamite! Pardon me, officer, is that General Washington? Bless your little heart, mum, and who may yez be, savin' yer prisince? Honest old Brigid the applewoman of Trinity, is it? . . . Gentlemen, I give you Martha Custis, hetman of the Don Cossacks, her features etched with the fragile beauty of a cameo. And I walked right in on her before she had a chance to pull the god-damned kimono together. . . . Tired, Roy, I'm tired, I tell you. Tired of the rain, the eternal surge of the breakers on that lagoon, the glitter of the reef in that eternity out there. . . . Yeh, yeh, so what? We made FOUR pictures like that last year. Oh, my God, Mr. Biberman, give me a chance, it's only a flashback to plant that she's a woman with a past. Sixteen hundred a week I pay you to hand me back the plot of *Love's Counterfeiters* Selig made in 1912! She's who? She's what? What's the idea her coming here? What's she trying to do, turn a production office into a whorehouse? No, Miss Reznick, tell her to wait, I'll be through in five minutes. . . . Yep, he's on a tear, those foreign directors are very temperamental, did I ever tell you about the time that Lazlo Nugasi said he'd buy me a brassiere if I let him put it on? Fake it with a transparency of Khyber Pass. Now an overhead shot of the dusty tired column filing into Sidi-bel-Abbes. Shoulder by shoulder they march in the faded blue of the Legion, fun-loving Dick and serious-minded Tom. Buddies, the greatest word in the French language. . . . Swinging a chair into that mob of lime-juicers in the Mile End Bar in Shanghai. But came a slant-eyed Chinese adventuress, and then? Don't shoot, Butch, for Gossake! Heave 'em into the

prison yard, we'll keep the screws out of the cell-block and wilderness were paradise enow. Stow the swag in Cincy, kid, and go on alone, I'm done for.... This is my hunting lodge, we'll stop here and dry your things. But of course it's all right, cara mia, I'm old enough to be your father. Let me go, you beast—MOTHER! What are you doing here? I ask you confidentially, Horowitz, can't we get that dame to put on some women's clothes, a skirt or something? The fans are getting wise, all those flat-heeled shoes and men's shirts like a lumberjack. Get me Gerber in publicity, he'll dish out some crap about her happy home life. . . . What, sir, you dare mention Alexandra Petrovna's name in a saloon? The kid takes it big and gives Diane the gloves across the pan socko. The usual satisfaction, I presume? Drawing on his gloves as a thin sneer played across his features. Yes, a martinet and for Chrisakes remember it's not a musical instrument this time. But eet ees madness, Serge! The best swordsman in St. Mary's parish, he well run you through in a tweenkling! Oh, darling, you can't, you can't. Her hair had become undone and he plunged his face into its fragrance, unbuckling his saber and flinging it on the bed beside them. . . . Shoot it two ways, you can always dub it in the sound track. She shrieks or she don't shriek, what the hell difference does it make? Told me he was going to night school at the Smolny Institute, the cur. And I believed him, thought Pyotr . . . surveying her luscious bust with greedy eyes. . . . Throw him your garter, Lady Aspinwall, throw your slipper, throw your lunch, but for Gawd's sake throw something! *Parry! Thrust! Touché!* Where are they all now, the old familiar faces?. . . Get Anderson ready with the sleighbells and keep that snow moving. Hit 'em all! Hotter on eighty-four, Joe Devlin! Are we up to speed? Quiet, please, we're turning!. . . You cut to the back of the Big Fellow, then three lap dissolves of the presses—give 'em that Ufa stuff, then to the street—a newsbody, insert of the front page, the El roaring by—Kerist, it's the gutsiest thing in pictures! Call you back, chief. Never mind the Hays office, this

baby is censor-proof! Call you back, chief. We'll heave the telephone through the back door and smack her in the kisser with the grapefruit, they liked it once and they'll love it twice. Call you back, chief. The gat in the mesh-bag. A symbol, get me? Now remember, staccato. . . . A bit tight, my sweet? Marrowforth teetered back and forth on his heels, his sensitive artist's fingers caressing the first edition he loved. . . . Do I have to work with a lot of pimply grips giving me the bird? Papa's in the doghouse and keep up the tempo of the last scene, you looked crummy in yesterday's dailies. A warm, vivid and human story with just that touch of muff the fans demand. . . . Ask Hyman Gerber of Waco, he can smell a box-office picture a mile away. In the freezing mists of dawn they gathered by the fuselages of their planes and gripped hands. But Rex Jennings of the shining eyes and the high heart never came back. Jerry got him over Chalons. I tell you it's murder to send a mere boy up there in a crate like that! The god-damned production office on my neck all day. It's midsummer madness, Fiametta! You mustn't! I must! I want you! You want me? But I—I'm just a poor little slavey, and you—why all life's ahead of you! Fame, the love of a good woman, children! And your music, Raoul! Excuse me, miss, are you Fiametta Desplains? I am Yankel Patchouli, a solicitor. Here is my card and a report of my recent urinalysis. Raoul! Raoul! Come quick! A million dollars! Now you can go to Paris and study your counterpoint! Damn my music, Fiametta, my happiness was in my own back yard all the time and I was, how you say it, one blind fool. . . . But why are you looking at me in that strange way, Tony? . . . Tony! I'm afraid of you! Oh. . . . You utter contemptible despicable CAD. . . . You didn't know she was the morganatic wife of Prince Rupprecht, did you? That her affairs with men were the talk of Vienna, did you? That—Vanya, is this true?. . . . Oh, mumsey, I want to die. That hooker's gotta lay off that booze, Mr. Metz, once more she comes on the set stinking and I take the next boat back to Buda-Pesth. But in a great

tangled garden sits a forlorn tragic-eyed figure; the face a mask of carved ivory, the woman nobody knows—Tilly Bergstrom. What lies behind her shattered romance with Grant Snavelly, idol of American flaps? Turn 'em over, you punks, I'll stay on this set till I get it right. Cheese it, de nippers! The jig is up, long live the jig—ring out the old, ring in the new. For love belongs to everyone, the best things in life are free.

—S.J. Perelman, from *Contact*, February, 1932 (excerpted)

Excerpt from *Scenario* used with permission from Harold Ober Associates, agent for Estate of S.J. Perelman.

Kyle Gann, born 1955 in Dallas, Texas, is a composer and was new-music critic for *The Village Voice* from 1986 to 2005. Since 1997 he has taught at Bard College. His books include *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow*, *American Music in the 20th Century*, *Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice*, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"*, *Robert Ashley*, *Charles Ives's Concord: Essays After a Sonata*, and *The Arithmetic of Listening: Tuning Theory and History for the Impractical Musician* (forthcoming). Gann studied composition with Ben Johnston, Morton Feldman, and Peter Gena, and his music is often microtonal, using up to 37 pitches per octave. His major works include *Sunken City*, a piano concerto commissioned by the Orkest de Volharding in Amsterdam; *Transcendental Sonnets*, a 35-minute work for choir and orchestra commissioned by the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir; *Custer and Sitting Bull*, a microtonal, one-man music-theater work he's performed more than 30 times from Brisbane to Moscow; *The Planets*, commissioned by the Relâche ensemble; and *Hyperchromatica* for three retuned, computer-driven pianos. In 2007, choreographer Mark Morris made a large-ensemble dance, *Looky*, from five of Gann's works for Disklavier (computerized player piano). His writings include more than 3,000 articles for more than 45 publications, including scholarly articles on La Monte Young, Henry Cowell,

John Cage, Edgard Varèse, Ben Johnston, Mikel Rouse, John Luther Adams, Dennis Johnson, and other American composers. He was awarded the Peabody Award (2003), the *Stagebill* Award (1999) and the Deems-Taylor Award (2003) for his writings. His music is available on the New Albion, New World, Cold Blue, Lovely Music, Mode, Other Minds, Meyer Media, New Tone, Microfest, and Monroe Street labels. In 2003, the American Music Center awarded Gann its Letter of Distinction, along with Steve Reich, Wayne Shorter, and George Crumb.

Martha Herr, soprano (1952–2015), performed in recitals, operas, and recordings in Brazil, the United States, and Europe as soloist and as a member of several chamber groups. Her performance specialties included contemporary and Brazilian music. Her extensive list of artistic premiers included Morton Feldman's opera *Neither* (Rome Opera) and John Cage's *EUROPERA V* (North American New Music Festival—recorded for Mode Records) as well as four Brazilian operas. In 2005, she organized the 4th Brazilian Vocal Encounter to promote the establishment of norms for lyric diction of Brazilian Portuguese, which were published in Portuguese and, in November 2008, in the *Journal of Singing* in English.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Desert Sonata. Included on *Other Places*. Lois Svard, piano. Lovely Music LCD 3052.
Ghost Town. New Tone nt 6730.
Hyperchromatica. Other Minds Records 1025.
Long Night. Sarah Cahill, pianos. Cold Blue CB0019.
Nude Rolling Down an Escalator: Studies for Disklavier. New World Records 80633.
Sunken City. Included on *The Minimalists*. Geoffrey Douglas Madge, piano; Volharding Orchestra; Jussi Jaatinen, conductor. Mode Records 214.

Producer/Engineer: M.C. Maguire (*Custer and Sitting Bull, Scenario*); Dale Hourlland (*So Many Little Dyings*)
Custer and Sitting Bull was recorded at M.C. Maguire Studio, Toronto in September 2007. *So Many Little Dyings* was recorded in Lewisburg, PA, in 1999. *Scenario* was recorded at Bard College on October 6, 2012.
Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC
Design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc.

All compositions published by Smith Grabholz Music.

This recording was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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KYLE GANN (b. 1955)
Custer and Sitting Bull



File Under: Classical/
 Contemporary/Gann, Kyle

Custer and Sitting Bull (1995–99) 35:14

1. Scene 1: Custer: "If I Were an Indian . . ." 8:41
2. Scene 2: Sitting Bull: "Do You Know Who I Am?" 8:17
3. Scene 3: Sun Dance/Battle of the Greasy-Grass River 8:02
4. Scene 4: Custer's Ghost to Sitting Bull 10:08
 Kyle Gann, voice & electronics

5. *So Many Little Dyings* (1994) 6:55
 Kenneth Patchen, voice; Kyle Gann, sampling keyboard

6. *Scenario* (2003–4) 17:05
 Martha Herr, voice; Kyle Gann, electronics

TT: 59:27



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