
“The Count of Infinity”

A mini-opera in three acts

words by Marc Abrahams

This mini-opera had its premiere as part of the 15th First Annual Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony, at Sanders Theatre, Harvard University, on Thursday evening, October 6, 2005.

Video of the entire ceremony, including “The Count of Infinity,” can be seen at the Improbable Research web site: www.improbable.com.

Original Cast

Narrator: Karen Hopkin

Pianist: Greg Neil

Countess of Infinity: Margo Button

Accountant: Simon Chausse

Citizens of the land of Infinity: Stacy Raphael and the Ig Nobel Minordomos, and the new Ig Nobel Prize winners, and Nobel Laureates Dudley Herschbach, William Lipscomb, Robert Wilson and Sheldon Glashow, and all of the other dignitaries who were on stage.

ACT 1 -- “The Infinite Inventory”

NARRATOR [*spoken*]: The Countess of Infinity rules over the land of Infinity -- which, let me tell you, is pretty big. The Countess wants to fall in love, get married, and have children. But first -- first! -- she has to complete a count of everything she owns. She is going to count EVERYTHING in the land of Infinity.

That’s because the Countess suffers from a psychological disorder.

It’s called OCD -- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.

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The Countess needs help. So she hires a handsome young accountant, to assist in the counting. Let’s join them at their first meeting.

[MUSIC: Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, Mozart]

COUNTESS:

I, the Countess of Infinity,
Am aware of my virginity.

Dear sir,



I know it sounds abstruse.
But here is my excuse
Why I can’t reproduce.

Simon Chausse and Margo Button
sing the leads in “The Count of
Infinity.” Photo: David Holzman.

I’ve got to make an inventory first of
ev’rything I own.

This is how I live.
O C D
Makes me be
All obsessed, and com-pul-sive.

So no wedding rings,
Or even flings,
‘Til I complete my current counting spree.

So pardon me.

Now don’t you know I’d love to be impulsive?
Oh! But romance is repulsive
Until I finish counting

Counting, counting,
Counting, counting,
Counting, counting,
Counting, counting,
Counting, counting,
Counting, counting...

Help me finish counting. I need you.
I need help. I really do.
Counting isn’t something I find fun.
It’s mandatory. It’s got to be done.

“You really should have children!”
That’s what I hear folks mutter.
But my mind is a-clutter
With counting guns and butter.



The countess expresses her initial disdain for the accountant's cognitive abilities. Photo: Robin Abrahams.

Shoes and ships!
Chains and whips!
I cannot keep track
Of the categories without making slips.

Now please, please, please assist me!
And please don't mind my checking,
My calling and my becking,
My "breathing down your neck"-ing.
Di-li-gence
With percents
Is all you need show me
So I can see
You're not completely dense.

I really hope you're not a dope.
I really don't think I could cope.
Are you a dope?

HE: No, no. Nope! Nope, I am not a dope!

SHE:
I, the countess of Infinity,
Must continue my virginity!

ACT 2 -- "Principles of Accounting"

NARRATOR [*spoken*]: Our handsome young accountant decides that he needs to take charge of the project -- the

project to take a complete inventory of EVERYTHING in the land of Infinity. Why? Because he is falling in love with the Countess of Infinity, and wants to impress her. The Countess suspects that the young man is stupid, but she lets him keep counting. Why? Because she is falling in love with him. Let's join this incipient couple...

[MUSIC: "Là Ci Darem la Mano" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*]

HE: Principles of
accounting
Show just what I need to do.
For me, this is work amounting
To -- let me see -- oh, just a
month or two.

SHE: Your claim that it will be easy
To count to infinity...
Sounds way beyond being breezy.
It sounds like some new form of asininity.
Ass-i-ni-nity!

HE: Fear not!!!! For I'm an accountant.

SHE: Your manly goodness fills me with excitement.

HE: Good! I will set up your book-keeping.

SHE: But -- if your system's double-entry,
Why, that seems so element'ry.
Oh, it seems so element'ry.

HE: Double entry!
It keeps track of your possessions!

SHE: But won't we need extra sessions?

HE: That makes it twice as good.

SHE: I hope I've misunderstood...

HE: Yes, you've misunderstood!

SHE Ohhhh! Please, just say it in a nutshell!

HE: Tally! Just tally!

SHE: So -- Tally? Tally? Tally? Tally ho?

HE: Oh tally! Oh, tally!

SHE: Oh! Are we heading for disaster
If we don't find something faster?
Let's stop this crazy arguing!

HE: Don't dally! Let's tally!

SHE (*reluctantly*): Let's tally...

SHE: This count could take forever!
[HE: This count won't take forever!]
SHE: Unless we're very clever,
[HE: Because we're very clever!]
SHE: We'll tally, tally on, in-fin-it'ly.
[HE: We won't tally on in-fin-it'ly.]

BOTH (*with hands clasped together in infinite love*): Our love for this endeavor
Will never end. No, never!
We'd tally, tally on, in-fin-it'ly.
HE: We would!
SHE: We would. We would?
HE: We would!
BOTH: We'd tally in-fin-it'ly.
We'd tally in-fin-it'ly.
We'd tally in-fin-it'ly.

ACT 3 -- "The Count of Infinity"

NARRATOR [*spoken*]: Good news! The Countess of Infinity has tamed her obsessive-compulsive disorder. Her OCD is under control thanks to some pharmaceutical help. The Countess wishes that the handsome accountant would stop counting, and marry her and become the Count of Infinity. But... but... but.. he, the accountant, wants to finish counting ALLLLLLLLLLL the way to infinity. The nation's entire population -- played here by all the scientists who are with us on stage tonight -- is helping

[Left to right:] Veterinary professor Richard Jakowski, Ig Nobel Chemistry Prize winner Brian Gettlefinger, psychologist Robin Abrahams and Nobel Laureate William Lipscomb (as a beer bottle) act as extras in the finale of the mini-opera. Photo: David Holzman.



with the count.
Now let's join this infinite cast of characters, for the thrilling conclusion of the opera.

[Throughout this act, everyone except He and She goes through the motions of counting things.]

[*This first song is a capella sung by everyone on stage. Note: Singing the number properly becomes more awkward as the number gets bigger and gains more syllables with each verse.*]

[MUSIC: "Ninety-nine Bottles," traditional American spiritual.]

ALL: Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall.
Ninety-nine bottles of beer.
That bottle there looks like a pair!
One-hundred bottles of beer on the wall.

One-hundred bottles of beer on the wall.
One-hundred bottles of beer.
That bottle there looks like a pair!
One-hundred-and-one bottles of beer on the wall.

One-hundred-and-one bottles of beer on the wall.
One-hundred-and-one bottles of beer.
That bottle there looks like a pair!
One-hundred-and-two bottles of beer on the wall

--

SHE [*spoken*]: Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop!!!!!!
Enough, already.

[MUSIC: "The Champagne Waltz" from "Die Fledermaus," Johann Strauss II.]

[THEME:]

SHE: Counting one-by-one
You'll never get it done.
It should be clear to you
That you'll never reach
infinity,
Or anywhere in that vicinity.

HE: Counting one-by-one
Would NEVER get it done.
On that we are agreed.
I must simply multiply the
SPEED.
So, this is how I will proceed:

[CHORUS:]

HE: Hop-hopping like-like a kangaroo,
I will count ev'rything two-by-two.
Doubling the speed will assure that I'm
Going to finish in half the time.

[THEME:]

HE: Or, more rapidly,
I could count three-by-three...
Or faster, if I please!
I could even count by THIRTY-and-threes!
Why not by a THOUSAND-thirty-and-threes?

Why think small?
No reason -- none at all!
I'll count a MILLION at a crack.
Like Napoleon, I say "Attack!"

SHE [*spoken*]: You are a monomaniac.

[CHORUS:]

SHE: You could go on that way, happily.
All day and night, counting sappily.
You could go on that way all your life --
[*She speaks the next line*]
Or... you could stop, and make me your wife.

[THEME]

HE: Countess, I'm confused
I thought you were enthused,
Enraptured and entranced --
That until we'd reached infinity,
Your middle name would be "Virginity"!?

SHE: Oh, my dear, you see
When I had OCD,
My life was strict routine.
Filthy thoughts were few and far between.
But now I take fluoxetine!

[CHORUS]

SHE: I find infinity's no big deal
When I take Prozac with ev'ry meal.
Now that I'm taking the right amount,
I would be pleased if you'd be my Count.

[THEME]

HE: Counting is a drag.
But there's a little snag.
There's no way we can stop!
Count the dough our country spends on it.

Our economy depends on it.

SHE: You keep counting then,
Yes, you and all the men.
Yes, that arrangement's best.

HE: We can do it without feeling stressed!
We're strong. We never get depressed!

[CHORUS]

BOTH: Praised be the men of great intellect!
We must acknowledge they are correct!
There can be no doubt about it, then.
Women just don't count as much as men!

[*Everybody repeats the chorus*]

Stacy Raphael and William Lipscomb attempt to count an infinity
of beer bottles. Photo: Al Teich.

