

OUT OF KEY AND OF THIS WORLD: POUND'S MUSICAL AMBITION

Ego Scriptor Cantilena: The Music of Ezra Pound. Robert Hughes, conductor, with performances by The Other Minds Ensemble; The Arch Ensemble; Western Opera Theater; ASKO-ensemble; Villon Music Theatre; Conductus Ensemble; and featuring Nathan Rubin, violin. San Francisco: Other Minds, Inc. 2003.

Joe Francis Doerr

And will you, friends, say that I sing
in ignorance, that I know nothing, yet sing?
Beasties on wing
time's dart shall touch presently.
I was your goodly shade,
and your rage turns against me.

—Ode from the Shih-ching by Confucius, translation by Ezra Pound

“If I were not tone deaf,” Ezra Pound once told an acquaintance, “I might have enjoyed composing music.” All banter aside about his insensitivity to musical pitch, Pound’s flippant admission had more than a grain of truth to it: his tin ear for music is now as legendary as his brilliant ear for prosody. Of his singing voice he once told James Joyce that he possessed “the organ of a tree toad.” William Carlos Williams once commented that “Ezra couldn’t even carry a tune,” while W.B. Yeats declared Pound beyond tone deaf, claiming he sounded when he sang rather like “something on a very bad phonograph.” Once when a visitor asked Dorothy Pound about the “the puzzling sound of a typewriter and what seemed the yowling of a bass Siamese cat” emanating from the study, she explained that it was her husband: “He always does that when he’s working.”

His deficiency in tonal precision aside, Pound was not entirely without musical experience. While his formal training was not extensive he was exposed to a variety of musical perspectives from an early age, both his parents were amateur musicians and Pound himself studied the bassoon for a while and learned to play the clavichord “quite fluidly.” As an adult he befriended many accomplished musicians and composers including American expatriate composer George Antheil and the British early-music pioneer Arnold Dolmetsch. Pound’s friendship with Antheil would put him near the center of the musical world of the avant-garde during the 1920s and ’30s, while

the influence of Dolmetsch would kindle Pound's enduring interest in the music of the medieval, Renaissance and Baroque periods. Add to this the three years Pound spent in London as a music critic for the "The New Age," the influence of his lifelong mistress Olga Rudge (a concert violinist), and a desire to champion the obscure in music (a series of concerts Pound organized in Italy in the 1930s were among the first to bring the music of Vivaldi to the public's attention) and the portrait of a poet who has immersed himself in the study of music very quickly emerges.

Ever anxious to explore the historical relationship between music and poetry, and perhaps yielding to his own celebrated barbarian self-confidence, Pound determined in the early '20s to begin composing music. In 1923 he produced his first actual compositions, some violin arrangements of troubadour songs for Rudge. In 1923-24 he wrote "Le Testament de Villon," a one-act theatrical piece. Upon its completion he declared "I have made an opera," a statement that inspired Williams to snipe in disbelief "Why, he doesn't know one note from another!" Now these interesting works, which provide an important complement to Pound's poetic canon, can be heard on a CD released by Other Minds and produced by Charles Amirkhanian, the organization's director. *Ego Scriptor Cantilenae: The Music of Ezra Pound* includes excerpts from his two operas, "Le Testament" and "Cavalcanti," as well as two short violin pieces and a fragment of a musical setting of Catullus that was never completed. It comes with an 82-page booklet featuring track listings, notes on the performances, synopses, texts and translations, artist biographies, credits, an introduction by Amirkhanian, an essay on Pound the composer by Margaret Fisher, as well as the Confucian ode (in Chinese) included as an epigraph to this review.

While the collection is of musical works that are obviously those of an amateur, it is equally obvious that the amateur who produced these compositions was nothing less than passionate about his project. The ambitiousness of the arrangements and eccentric metrical notations—they range from 1/8 to 25/32—are vintage Pound, and one finds in such eccentricities music more closely related to the line-breaking innovations of *The Cantos* than to any traditional musical precedent. While few listeners will be persuaded that Pound was the great undiscovered musical prodigy of the twentieth century, it is likely that far more will find something to admire about the compositions. Despite the fact that Pound's yowling cat seems to make occasional appearances in the arrangements, these instances can be forgiven, even appreciated as moments exhibiting Pound's cunning use of the dramatic. They may also be regarded as products of that rough-and-tumble sense of "kulchural" integrity with which Pound often chooses to ground

(or purposely deface) so much of his best poetry.

Poetry, undoubtedly, was Pound's reason for entering the world of musical composition. While many listeners will find the violin pieces most accessible, it is the two lyrical pieces that appear to have garnered most of Pound's attention. Furthermore, the majority of the violin pieces (those written between 1923 and 1924) are so short as to be of little consequence—the longest is only forty-six seconds in length. This does not, however, diminish the simple beauty of the pieces, especially in light of the fact that they were gifts to Rudge. And *Al Poco Giorno* (c. 1931), a setting of Danté's sestina by the same title, may very well be the apex of Pound's achievement as a composer, but this piece too is distinguished from the other violin pieces by its close ties to poetry. The two "operas" (to borrow quotation marks from the rather patronizing entry on Pound in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*) are less remarkable for their musical innovation than for the enthusiasm and nuance with which they treat the poetry of François Villon, the 15th century French troubadour, and Guido Cavalcanti, the 13th century Florentine poet and close friend of Danté.

Though declared operas by Pound, the lyrical pieces are actually song cycles, individual poems by Villon and Cavalcanti that have been set to music and pieced together into loose contextual narratives. "Le Testament," a work that has been revised several times over the years shows more unbridled passion than its counterpart. Perhaps this is due to Pound's relative youth at the time it was written, or perhaps it has more to do with Pound's obvious zeal for the subject of this work. Pound puts his expert knowledge of early French prosody to astonishing use in the Villon setting staying within the hexatonic scale to suggest the feel of troubadour melodies. To this evocation of the traditional he adds an austere dissonance reminiscent of Stravinski that produces a tension within the music giving it an undeniably modern sensibility.

Pound gives "Le Testament" a gritty authenticity that conveys the stark tension inherent in the story of Villon (in some sense a portent for his own future). Villon, the *poet manqué* and libertine, is condemned to death for his various crimes including treason and the murder of a priest. He spends his final moments among the beggars, thieves, and prostitutes who formed his life-long retinue. This is an image of the poet that Pound seems to have carried with him and one he will come perilously close to experiencing first-hand some twenty-five years later. In 1945 when he himself is accused of treason, and is pecking out the "Pisan Cantos" on a broken typewriter in a cage nearly identical to those now being used at Guantanamo Bay, he echoes in words what he manages to capture musically in "Le Testament." Quoting

Villon and perhaps yowling like a cornered Siamese cat as he types, he will write “*Les larmes que j’ai crees m’inondent / Tard, tres tard je t’ai connue, la Tristesse, / I have been hard as youth sixty years.*”

The Cavalcanti piece exhibits much more control; Pound’s skill as a composer had obviously progressed by 1932 when it was written for the BBC. “Cavalcanti” seems more lyrical and reserved than the Villon piece, and its rich harmonic textures and melodies are well-suited to the poetry from which they are derived. The piece, a trio of acts, takes as its subject three scenes from the life of Cavalcanti: a grave-yard confrontation between the young Cavalcanti and his political rivals who taunt him with his juvenilia; a domestic scene in which Cavalcanti is asked by his comrades to recite his best poem though they don’t understand it; and Cavalcanti’s deathbed scene in exile in which he hopes to relay a message coded in song to his beloved Guelph party in Florence through his page Ricco who is nearly incapable of learning the song/message. This last act produces one of the collection’s truly memorable performances (along with Anna Myatt’s Hëaulmiere (“Hëaulmiere’s Aria”) of “Le Testament”), that of boy soprano Michael Bannett whose angelic Ricco (“Perch’io non spero”) is awe-inspiring. What is most striking about the arrangement is that Pound has chosen scenes that take as their primary theme Cavalcanti’s (for Cavalcanti’s read Pound’s) dilemma of creating works that are either misunderstood, never cohere, or are never truly learned.

Pound was not the only poet to try his hand at musical composition over the years—there is Louis Zukofsky, Ed Sanders, and Allen Ginsburg to name only a few—and it would not be unreasonable for one to suggest that little if any attention would be given to these modest experiments in music were it not for Pound’s prodigious literary contribution. Ingenuous though they may be, however, Pound’s compositions do somehow transcend their limitations. Perhaps this should come as no surprise given that much of Pound’s inventiveness in all areas of interest seems to have been directly inspired by his inabilities. His ideogrammatic method as a medium for poetry, for instance, grew out his rudimentary knowledge of Chinese. His resulting meta-translations from the classical Chinese, though neither scholarly nor accurate, are nonetheless respected as having captured the spirit of the originals. Their vitality is derived from their inventiveness which is a direct product of misreading. Pound was shrewd enough to realize that such disparity was the key to a new kind of coherence—one that may very well cohere precisely because it does not cohere in any traditional way. In other words, he discovered that being somewhat out of tune made for new perspectives, and he proved time and again as a writer that he was



at his most creative when he was not the least bit in tune. It is as though in his efforts to “resuscitate the dead art of poetry” Pound had concluded that being “out of key” with one’s time and its anodyne notions of expression is a primary source of artistic power.

