

Hughes, Robert, and Margaret Fisher. *Cavalcanti: A Perspective on the Music of Ezra Pound*. Emeryville CA: Second Evening Art Publishing, 2003.

Fisher, Margaret. *Ezra Pound's Radio Operas: The BBC Experiments, 1931-1933*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.

The missing piece in the puzzle of Ezra Pound has finally been put into place. Thanks are due to two expert and devoted scholars in California, Robert Hughes and Margaret Fisher. After decades of teasing references, suggestive rumours, snippets of documentation, this series of publications, coming in rapid succession, finally reveals a full-length portrait of Ezra Pound the composer. In 1972, a vinyl LP recording of Pound's first opera *The Testament of François Villon*, directed by Robert Hughes, appeared: it was the first time Pound's music had been made available in any form for general distribution. Now, after more than two decades, Fisher and Hughes have produced a complete critical text of Pound's second opera *Cavalcanti*, long thought to have been lost, plus critical editions of Pound's music for violin, written for Olga Rudge, and even an edition of the uncompleted third opera *Collis o Heliconii*, on texts of Catullus and Sappho (which at the time of writing I have not yet seen). There is also a CD recording of excerpts from all of these works. Together with R. Murray Schafer's edition of Pound's writings about music,¹ Pound's devotees now have for the first time, at long last, access in some form to the entire creative canon of Pound's work, the shape of which is significantly altered by the inclusion of the operas. The three, including the unfinished Catullus piece, form what Margaret Fisher calls a "love trilogy" (154), each opera offering a dramatic picture of one of the most colorful *poètes maudits* of European civilization.

The importance of music in Pound's canon – the music that Pound actually wrote – has never been properly weighed. Inaccessibility to the texts is just one reason. Pound's obvious musical amateurishness is another. And there are more subtle factors – the relatively higher comfort level felt by literary scholars with visual arts *vis à vis* music, and the greater dominance of the visual arts in the formation of twentieth-century modernism. But Pound actually devoted more of his energies to music. His music criticism is more extensive than his art criticism; he cultivated musical friends throughout his life, from Katherine Ruth Heyman and Walter Rummel in his youth to his beloved Olga Rudge; and his busy career as a composer extends from as early as 1910 to the late 1930s.² To one who has leaved through the bewildering and repetitive stacks of Pound's musical manuscript at the Beinecke, "a labyrinth that has had few visitors" says Fisher (6), her estimate that he must have spent at least 1,000 hours just writing drafts and copying seems, if anything, overly cautious.

¹*Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism* (New York: New Directions, 1977); *Complete Violin Works of Ezra Pound*, with commentary by Robert Hughes, introduction by Margaret Fisher (Emeryville CA: Second Evening Art Publishing, 2004); *Ego Scriptor Cantilenae: The Music of Ezra Pound*, CD issued by Other Minds (San Francisco), with booklet by Margaret Fisher. See also the Other Minds website at <http://www.ezrapoundmusic.com>. Future plans include publication of the Pound/Anthel score of *Le Testament* in CD-Rom format.

²Grace Lovat Fraser, in a memoir overlooked I think by Poundians, recalls helping him notate tunes to troubadour and early Italian lyrics when she knew him shortly after publication of the 1909 *Personae*. See *In the Days of My Youth* (London: Cassell, 1970), 125-28.

Pound's music could hardly be better served than by Robert Hughes and Margaret Fisher. While devoting themselves to the cause over a sustained period of time, both have made distinguished careers outside of Pound scholarship. Hughes is a professional performing musician: a champion of new music as conductor and bassoonist, a co-founder with the late Lou Harrison of the Cabrillo Music Festival, as well as a composer whose catalogue of work includes commissions from major orchestras and film makers, including Disney. Fisher has been a lively presence as choreographer and video director on the West Coast scene for the past three decades. Hughes met Pound during his final months at St Elisabeths in 1958 and undertook the first complete staged performance of Pound's *Le Testament* with the San Francisco Opera's Western Opera Theater in 1971, a version that fully realizes the complexities of the 1923 Pound/Antheil score. Fisher and Hughes met in 1976. At that time, Hughes believed the Pound work was behind him; but in a visit to Olga Rudge in Rappallo he opened an old trunk thought to contain manuscripts relating to *Le Testament* and discovered as well material from the *Cavalcanti* – material that proved to be the missing pages from manuscripts in the Beinecke collection. He pieced together a performing edition of Pound's second opera and mounted a concert performance in San Francisco in 1983. The scholarly edition of *Cavalcanti* is the final product of this devotion.

For Pound's music requires passionate advocacy, and receives it here. As Fisher declares in her book, "I have put aside assumptions of amateurism regarding Pound's abilities either as dramatist or composer on the premise that he brought his artistry and intelligence to bear upon a medium new to him." Without fail, she says, negotiating Pound's apparent obstacles to performance, overcoming every apparent crudity, has "proved to be crucial to an understanding of the logic of the work" (5). Fisher and Hughes have given Pound's music the chance to speak on its own. Whatever one thinks of its achievement – and I tend myself to be more circumspect than Fisher and Hughes – Pound scholars now have sufficient means to understand Pound's purposes and assimilate these works into the canon.

The *Cavalcanti* volume is aptly subtitled "A Perspective on the Music of Ezra Pound." It falls into two parts. The second, about 200 pages long, is a critical text of the fourteen numbers of Pound's opera in full score, plus a piano reduction for rehearsal purposes, all meticulously edited from Pound's handwritten drafts. It includes Pound's intervening dialogue between numbers, written for the radio broadcast, plus a synopsis and an appendix with texts of the songs and English translations. (Performance materials are available from the publisher.)

The first half of the volume is a 200-page essay that outlines Pound's compositional career: It includes a fully documented account of the arduous composition of *Le Testament*, with help from his friend Agnes Bedford and composer George Antheil, plus a perceptive contrast between the first and second operas. *Le Testament* is rhythmically irregular, restricted in vocal range (guided by the medieval hexachord), lightly harmonized and fitted with fragmentary instrumentation: the music is subservient to the verse. *Cavalcanti*, which Pound wrote mainly on his own, is rhythmically symmetrical, extends to full operatic vocal range, more triadically harmonized, and given sustained instrumental accompaniment: the music supports the text but is not subservient to it. Pound conceived it for true operatic voices: "I want to avoid complaint as re/Villon that the stuff don't give the bastuds a CHANCE to show off" (*Cavalcanti* 59). His musical and dramatic purposes were quite different in the two works. Furthermore, Pound, having committed himself in *Le Testament* to an effort to reproduce word rhythms in Antheil's painstaking quasi-ethnomusicological notation, was persuaded by his musical associates of the impracticability of the procedure, which was abandoned first in the simplified performing

versions of the Villon music, and then in the *Cavalcanti*. One senses the relief of Robert Hughes too – who had wrestled so courageously with the Pound/Antheil notation in the 1971 performance – in reporting Pound’s decision. The essay then describes Pound’s composition of *Cavalcanti* in detail, and offers extended musical analysis that makes great claims for Pound as a melodist. One appendix outlines Pound’s compositions for solo violin – material revised and expanded in the later edition of the violin music – and another sketches an approach to “Great Bass,” the first substantial effort to clarify Pound’s murky thoughts in this area.³

Margaret Fisher’s monograph *Ezra Pound’s Radio Operas* is, given the parallel subject matter, a very different kind of work with surprisingly little overlap. In fact, to anyone who has experienced the repetitiveness and redundancy of so much critical writing, Fisher’s book presents new matter and reveals Pound in an unfamiliar guise – that of apprentice to a new technology. The modest subtitle *BBC Experiments, 1931-1933* just hints at the broader scope of her study. Emphasis falls here less on Pound the composer than on Pound the media artist – what we would nowadays call a “communications specialist” – and Fisher gives us as well a fascinating inside view of both the early BBC and the development of radio broadcasting. Her study comprehends not only the artistic decisions, but the interplay of politics and personalities, during the period when Pound devoted much of his energy to the delivery of *Le Testament* over the airwaves, and the conception of his *Cavalcanti* as a (never to be heard) sequel. When Pound picked up the microphone to broadcast for Mussolini, once in 1935 and later beginning in January 1941, he was already thoroughly familiar with the inner workings of radio.

The second principal in this narrative is E.A.F. Harding (1903-1953), a pioneer in the development of public broadcasting and documentary. It was through Harding’s invitation in 1931 that *Le Testament* became one of the first operas ever broadcast. Harding, an “Oxford intellectual Marxist,” who, rejecting his upper class background, believed that all broadcasting was a form of propaganda, and hoped that it would “free poetry from the limitations of print” [83 / letter to EP 1931] His wish was to bring work by the best writers to the air, and to open up the airwaves to the working classes. Eventually Harding, it seems, ran afoul of internal politics at the BBC, dueling with, among others, Val Gielgud, the actor’s brother. But Harding in 1931, expert and innovative in the ways of the new medium – montage, superimposition, close-up, echo – took it upon himself not only to broadcast Pound but to instruct him.

Alas, nothing remains of this 1931 broadcast, not a vibe, but Margaret Fisher has pieced together the essentials from an impressive archive of extant ephemera. Her book falls into four main divisions. An opening chapter sets out preliminaries: Focusing on *Le Testament*, it covers Pound’s views on drama, with particular attention to the designation “melodrama” attached to the opera, discusses problematic elements of performance, and relates the work to *The Cantos*. Radio technology had aesthetic as well as political implications. In 1945, Delmore Schwartz developed the notion of Eliot’s *Waste Land* as a radio poem in which the reader “by turning the

³See Margaret Fisher’s extended treatment of the subject in “Great Bass: Undertones of Continuous Influence,” *Performance Research* 8.i (Spring 2003), 23-40.

dials . . . can hear the capitals of the world: London, Vienna, Athens, Alexandria, Jerusalem.”⁴ But as early as 1924, Pound had so described *The Cantos* in a letter to his father: “Simplest parallel I can give is radio where you tell who is talking by the noise they make” (40).

Chapter Two places the 1931 broadcast in its historical context: Here we learn much not only about Harding and his relationship to Pound, but about the state of broadcasting and media theory in the years surrounding the event. There is a fine discussion of Marinetti and the relationship between radio technology and Futurist aesthetics – the varieties Futurist performance art, the dramatic *sintesi*, the 1933 manifesto *La Radia*. Others are drawn into the picture: Brecht’s call for inter-active radio, and Rudolf Arnheim’s oddly off-kilter theoretical book *Radio* [1936], the first of its kind. The political scene is sketched in, with comparative discussion of English, German, and Italian radio. All is done with the sensitive touch of a writer who herself has direct experience of the performing arts.

Chapters Three and Four concentrate on the operas themselves, as Pound prepared the 1923 Antheil score for its first complete performance and supplied written dialogue specifically for the broadcast. There is amusing discussion about languages – the mixture of fifteenth-century French with modern American-inflected British slang and dialect, the BBC worrying mainly about British hostility to the slang. The mix of languages, as Fisher notes, signals to the listener a dual time-frame as well, simultaneously medieval and modern. With Harding’s guidance, Pound was able to reconceive his opera originally intended for the stage in terms of a newly emerging genre, the radio drama. The chapter includes extended commentary on the numbers of the opera, the dramatic structure, the members of the cast, and the performance history of the piece. My only quibble here is that Fisher’s emphasis on the radio broadcast somewhat obscures Pound’s original conception of *Le Testament* as a stage work – and Pound seriously agitated in his correspondence for performances at the Abbey Theater, and even at the Metropolitan in New York – though Fisher does remark on his hopes, never realized, for eventual presentation on film or even television (130).

But the *Cavalcanti* was conceived from the first with radio in mind, with narrative supplied both by dialogue and an announcer’s voice. Fisher’s here covers the preparation of the work – no larger than *Le Testament* but conceived in larger terms, in three distinct Acts, based on anecdotes about Cavalcanti’s life, and focusing on Pound’s setting of Cavalcanti’s canzone “Dona mi prega” in Act Two. One of the most curious features is an extended discussion of the “cipher,” which Pound puts at the center of Guido Cavalcanti’s death scene in Act Three. Pound’s essay on Cavalcanti had puzzled over Luigi Valli’s 1928 speculations about ciphers and clandestine communications among members of a love cult in Cavalcanti’s Italy. Fisher produces a note scrawled in Pound’s hand on the back of the script for the opera: “Tried to decode the poems thinking the cipher is in the words whereas the cipher was really in the music.” From these clues, she offers an intriguing and plausible reading of possible cipher in Pound’s tunes. One’s first reaction to this is relief that Pound’s interest in cipher never emerged during his 1945 treason hearings in Washington. On further reflection, one begins to wonder to what extent this interest might also figure in *The Cantos*.⁵

So much new information will take time for the scholarly community to assimilate. But

⁴“T.S. Eliot as the International Hero,” in Philip Rahv, ed., *Literature in America* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1957), p. 335.

⁵This is not an endorsement of Forrest Read’s eccentric sleuthing in *‘76: One World and ‘The Cantos’ of Ezra Pound* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1981), but it opens possibilities.

there are signs. Daniel Albright's provocative multi-disciplinary analysis of early twentieth-century Modernism *Untwisting the Serpent* presents Pound's *Le Testament* as one of its central exhibits. Brad Bucknell, in his *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, joins the handful of individuals who have discussed Pound's music knowledgeably. On other fronts, Charles Timbrell's long-awaited biography of Walter Morse Rummel, *Prince of Virtuosos*, has appeared, revealing Pound's friend as the commanding, flamboyant figure he was. And George Antheil's music, too, seems to be receiving some due homage.⁶ Eventually, perhaps, Pound studies will come to terms with Pound the musician. Robert Hughes and Margaret Fisher have begun to make that possible.

⁶See Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2000); Brad Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics: Pater, Pound, Joyce, and Stein* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001); Charles Timbrell, *Prince of Virtuosos : A Life of Walter Rummel, American Pianist* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005). For Antheil, see especially Paul D. Lehrman's realization of *Ballet Mécanique*, on a CD from the Electronic Music Foundation, as well as discs in the Naxos American Classics series.