

AGNES BEDFORD: AN INVISIBLE HELPMATE

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AGNES BEDFORD (1892–1969) was a lifelong musical friend of Pound, who from his earliest years sought out accomplished musicians like Katherine Ruth Heyman, Walter Rummel and of course Olga Rudge. Bedford was a vocal coach and accompanist rather than a solo performer like Heyman or Rummel, so she worked behind the scenes. As a coach, she taught singers, both student and professional, elements of technique and interpretation: phrasing, timbre, articulation, diction in various languages, and the like. When she appeared in public, it was always in the subordinate role of accompanist, though she appeared with some major performers, particularly Blanche Marchesi, who was a noted recitalist and Wagnerian soprano, prima at Covent Garden for a number of years, and daughter of Mathilde Marchesi, one of the most important performers and influential voice teachers of her generation. Bedford can still be heard playing the piano behind Blanche Marchesi on a number of 78rpm recordings.¹

In her relationship with Pound, Bedford was not an originator of ideas, but rather a musical mentor and a link to the professional musical world. She had a wide network of acquaintances. Her interests paralleled Pound's: she followed developments in the post-Dolmetsch revival of early music and co-translated Henri Dupré's book on Purcell; and she followed the advanced modernists as well. When Pound advised young poets to 'dissect the lyrics of Goethe into their component sound values' (*LE* 5), he was only advising what every coach of Lieder singers does every day for a living. Most importantly, she was a principal amanuensis who helped Pound write down the music for his first opera, and later, a crucial link with the BBC, which broadcast the first complete performance of *Le Testament de François Villon* in October 1931. Through Pound, Bedford also met Wyndham Lewis, and became a significant figure in his biography as well.

Bedford's name first appears in William Atheling's review in *The New Age* for 20 November 1919, where he praises her as 'excellent in her accompaniment' (*EPM* 195). The recitalist was Violet Marquesita, a pupil of Blanche Marchesi, who later sang the role of Villon's Mother in the 1931 BBC broadcast. As Atheling, Pound made a habit of meeting with performers and cajoling them into performing his favoured early music, which he lists conveniently in the last of his *New Age* reviews (*EPM* 239–40). The list includes not only then standard collections of *arie antiche* and folksongs, but his own versions of nine troubadour songs arranged by Walter Rummel as *Hesternae Rosae* (1913), and a new collection of *Five Troubadour Songs* (1920) issued that December by Boosey, with piano arrangements by Agnes Bedford. The songs were printed with original Provençal texts, but also, for singers who could not manage that language,

with words by Chaucer adapted by Pound to fit the music. Pound was pleased with it, but for 'one page full of misprints' (*L/HP* 475). Bedford seems to have had influence with Boosey, since Pound suggests in a letter (13 August 1922) that she get them to print songs from his opera.

Pound had cherished the idea of composing his own songs for many years, but he required help from a trained musician. The actress Grace Crawford recalls his efforts from as early as 1910 (Fraser 1970: 123–44)² and he apparently tried to tap Rummel as well. But Rummel was busy with his own successful concert career – not to mention his liaison with Isadora Duncan – and Pound was fortunate to find in Agnes Bedford a musician with not only the expertise but the patience and personal devotion to take pains with him. She yielded gracefully to Antheil, who was at hand in Paris, but Pound returned to Bedford when Antheil went his own way.

From the time of their meeting in November 1919 to Pound's departure for Paris in January 1920, Pound and Bedford must have spent time together working on their troubadour songs and getting a start on her musical tutelage. Pound's texts were at first troubadour poems, and the decision to set Villon seems to have come later, since verbal 'music' is not the most obvious quality of Villon's work. In a letter of 18 December 1919, Pound writes of 'Frères humains', 'I had never thought of setting until yesterday', going on to praise a Cavalcanti sonnet 'full of music', and Stuart Merrill, 'where the music is made, absolutely made, by the words'. When Pound started composing, he no doubt consulted Bedford frequently, but seems to have as yet hardly formed the opera project. Asked by a journalist about his plans in Paris, he announced that he would 'devote himself to his study of 12th-century music', and that 'he is also writing a long poem' (Stock 1970: 236). The equation of music with *The Cantos* is notable, but his focus was still the troubadours. When Pound left London, Bedford sublet his flat at 5 Holland Park Chambers, complete with books, papers and Arnold Dolmetsch's clavichord (*EPP* I: 408). Thereafter, Pound pestered her repeatedly to hunt up and send him particular books or papers. Bedford also travelled to Paris, for Pound wrote to her on 26 March 1923, 'Haven't worked so hard since the fortnight I nearly killed you in Paris – perhaps three weeks more will see the end or a breathing space.' As Bedford recalled thirty-six years later, 'I took the whole Villon work down from Ezra's singing, and performances at the piano that summer of 1921 in the Rue Jacob – I have my own scribbled pages from that time, and I suppose Ezra had the *copies* I made for him then & worked them over with Antheil' (Bedford to Dorothy Pound, 19 November 1967). They worked four to six hours per day, even up to nine hours, Pound singing and picking out notes on Natalie Barney's piano. He sang each of the six voices of 'Frères humains' separately, Bedford recalled, and they fit together perfectly – a miracle (*EPP* II: 18–19). On 2 November 1921, he wrote to Bedford that the opera was complete. Two years later, George Antheil worked from this version and produced his own revision of the score, dated 31 December 1923.

Pound wanted his opera to honour the period style, including the bare, unharmonised tunes of the troubadours, but in a modern way that would not obscure the words or alter the verbal rhythms. His MSS (there are stacks of hundreds of pages of scored manila music paper) show him choosing the pitches, as he put it, for the tunes and sticking with them, but fussing endlessly over the rhythms, never satisfied. Even after Antheil

had copied out the full MS of *Le Testament*, Pound prepared further performance versions in simpler notation, apparently not merely for ease of performance, but trying to capture the rhythms he heard more accurately. As he wrote to his father (2 March 1926),

That 5/8 has taken about fourteen years to discover. i.e. neither Walter, nor Agnes, nor even young Jarge, had managed, for one reason or another to find out that most of my rhythms do not fit bars of two, three or four EVEN or equal notes, or rather they had ALL found out that, but none of em hit the simple division of two longs and a short (or the various equivalents).

You will see the two Villon songs split into all sorts of bars; but the lot I have just fixed up for the June show has been, tentatively at least, laid out largely in 5/8. (L/HP 588)

As early as 14 August 1926, he writes to Bedford that he prefers his own 5/8 redactions to Antheil's notations. And on 21 January 1926, 'Antheil version highly instructive, as measure of duration of individual notes, mhavvvelous, BUT no practical use, NO grasp of articulation, or phrase structure, nacherly, as he knows no French, and nawthing about any langwidg.'

Bedford is not heard in the 1931 BBC broadcast of *Villon*, but as Margaret Fisher writes, she was the rehearsal coach and 'worked side by side with [Archibald] Harding for days on end'. She also reported on the internal tensions surrounding the project, and 'the savage mistrust of everyone else in the building' (Fisher 2002: 3, 74).³

The correspondence between Bedford and Pound is extensive, stretching from 1920 to 1968, including exchanges between Bedford and Dorothy Pound. The collection at the Beinecke Library contains mainly Bedford's letters to Ezra, that in the Lilly Library his letters to her.⁴ The earlier letters offer a window into their collaboration, their opinions of various composers and performers, as well as a perspective on Pound's deficiencies as a practical musician. Bedford's network of professional acquaintances was vital for the casting of the 1931 BBC broadcast. Some of the correspondence shows her trying to round up singers. For the 1926 performance, she did not know Yves Tinayre, whom Pound met in Paris, but she did know Robert Radford, Beecham's preferred bass, who sang the drunken Bozo. Pound tried to persuade her to come to Paris and play the harpsichord, but she protested that she had never played that instrument and felt 'safer on piano, much as you dislike it' (n.d., 1925). Bedford was also connected with Marchesi's pupils, Violet Marquesita and Raymonde Collignon, who performed in the BBC broadcast, and she is responsible for persuading Gustave Ferrari to take on the role of Villon.

She does not seem to have been jealous of Antheil's intervention in the opera, writing that it was 'a very good thing to have Antheil work on score' (25 September 1923). And it was she who read through all of the William Atheling reviews in *The New Age* and selected the bons mots printed in Pound's book on Antheil. Just 'tell me exactly what you want me to do', she wrote (25 September 1923). When the book appeared, she reassured Pound: 'I don't think your propaganda did anything detrimental' (23 June 1924). She attended Antheil's recital in London with Olga Rudge and relayed an anecdote: a lady 'was reading your article in *Criterion* all through concert & seemed to approve greatly', she said. A few 'laughed through Antheil's first item, but very quietly' and 'a good many

left after it. All the remainder were most enthusiastic' (23 June 1924). Shortly after, she declared that 'Antheil's playing was magnificent' and that 'Rudge played [Antheil's Violin Sonatas] very well, with great precision and clearness.'

Bedford's personal friendship was with Dorothy, not with Olga. Soon after meeting Olga, Pound asked Bedford to recommend 'any book on early violin music' (18 August 1923). But there were tensions. After the war, Bedford wrote to Dorothy, 'In the matter of Mary Rudge, I only hope she is nicer than her mother, whom I never liked' (7 January 1946).

Bedford's letters are also filled with comments on musical matters of general interest. Bedford was acquainted with the Dolmetsch family and attended their concerts: 'Rudolf plays beautifully on all instruments, Carl very good on recorder' (n.d., 1933). In 1939, she tried to arrange a performance by Rudolph, who was 'excited at chance to conduct in Venice'. Pound replied, 'Casella favorable to Rudolph Dolmetsch – plans for future concerts' (17 December 1939), but the war intervened. She knew the celebrated Russian tenor Vladimir Rosing, whom Pound admired extravagantly: 'If you are at Rosing concert in Paris, tell him I am splendid' (10 November 1922). She seems to have known Adrian Boult (7 December 1939) and refers Antheil to meet the young Eugene Goossens, who recorded the Fourth Symphony after the war (25 September 1923). She had her own opinions of Pound's French musical acquaintances: 'You seem to admire or tolerate Satie – I not. I find more hope in Milhaud, though not liking him much' (25 September 1923). She reports favourable opinions of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and one of Bartok's string quartets, and perhaps most remarkably, in her last years she wrote to Dorothy Pound that she had heard Luciano Berio's 'Homage to Dante' on the BBC and thought him 'much the most interesting of the Italian modernist school . . . a very different kettle of fish from the Spoleto fellow [Menotti]' (23 September 1967).

Most revealing, perhaps, are the letters that comment on Bedford's transcriptions of Pound's melodies in *Villon*. She made the heroic first efforts to create practical performing texts, and in the process, mentored Pound in the niceties of musical notation, the capacities of the singing voice, and the effectiveness of accompaniment and orchestration. On 16 May 1921, Pound wrote, 'I have done 116 pages of something that looks, at 1st glance, like an orchestral score', and nine days later, 'Do you remember the tune enough to correct my imbecilities.' Among the imbecilities is the correct notation for the English horn: attempting to write it as a transposing instrument in F, Pound writes F# for B and needs to be corrected. An undated letter in the William Bird collection from this period suggests that Bedford had an intuition for Pound's idiosyncratic accompaniments. Although she had supplied the troubadour songs of 1920 with conventional piano arpeggios and chords, she knew Pound's opera demanded a wholly different approach. 'I thought your list of instruments rather long. Personally I should use as little as possible – very few chords – what there are [supply?] cues – that is no "harmony".' 'Continual contrapuntal treatment would be very worrying, unbearable I think, besides it's not necessary.' 'The audience, as you rightly suggest, hears very little, if anything, of orchestral intricacies anyway.' Their attention will be held by plot: 'I still think great skill will be needed to make harmonization of these tunes satisfactory – not to the audience, I mean . . . to you & me . . . chiefly me!'. 'Tunes can lose half their quality or more when unsuitably arranged.' She cites some bad examples, including Roger Quilter and Cyril Scott, and adds that it must be 'very carefully done

with wide unobtrusive pattern in orchestra or else no pattern to speak of . . . I think an ordinary counterpoint wouldn't do.' 'I think you want certain bass instruments to be very firm with rhythm . . . & very little violin assistance.' Sideways on the page she notes, 'I don't mean no orchestra. I mean no one will listen to anything but tune and words' (YCAL MSS 4/147-9).

At some point, Pound had introduced Bedford to his friend Wyndham Lewis. The two became close and, as Lewis's latest biographer has revealed, they had an affair beginning in the 1920s, and there were even murmurs about marriage. Nothing is known about their relationship but the smattering Paul O'Keefe divulges: she was 'Miss Bedford' in 1921, 'Aggy' in 1923, and later for unknown reasons 'Twin'. The liaison ended when Lewis married Gladys, or 'Froanna' Hoskins in October 1930, and Lewis's personal notes say 'Cease to see Twin' on a timeline with an arrow pointed between September and November (O'Keefe 2000: 569).

Bedford's assistance with *Cavalcanti*, Pound's second opera, was less direct but just as vital. She recalled three decades later,

I never transcribed the *Cavalcanti* from his dictation – As far as I know he did it all himself, as he had then mastered musical notation – He sent me copies of 6 or 8 pieces from it for my comments – advice – criticism – These are in his handwriting and I have them still – I was never enthusiastic about the *Cavalcanti*, and I imagine he dropped the idea of doing that as an opera – at least that's all I know about it. (Agnes Bedford to Dorothy Pound, 19 November 1967)

She was wrong, since Pound did in fact complete *Cavalcanti*. Nonetheless, since Pound's writing had become more ambitiously operatic, she supplied practical help with vocal ranges. About 'Sol per Pieta' she asked, 'who's singing? [It] certainly seems to lie rather high.' It would be

difficult for any voice but a first class operatic tenor or dramatic soprano. . . . the optional C you speak of is really a C# on your copy attacked suddenly on its own after a low G#. I don't think anyone could tackle it – as the lowest note seems to be E the whole song could probably quite well come down one tone if necessary.

'Poi che doglia' is 'all right', and 'Guarda ben dico' is the best of the lot for 'easy vocalizing', but 'Era in pensier' 'seems to lie very low'.

If transposed higher it would be just as difficult because the weight is at the bottom of the voice. I don't know if Ferrari can do it. . . . am rather averse to showing him anything until it is fixed. . . . quite prepared to write any work over for himself. (YCAL 43 4/148)

For guidance, she writes out the medium voice range 'with extensions down'. The year 1933 also saw her writing about possible performances of two of the numbers, 'Tos temps serai' and 'Io son la donna'.

After completion of *Cavalcanti*, the correspondence shows a great deal of interest in the Rapallo concerts of 1933, 1934 and later, but little direct involvement.

Pound makes one sidelong reference to the uncompleted Catullus opera: 'I have been foolish enough to restart the Catullus' (August 1932), but very little on the monumental effort to revive Vivaldi, which centred primarily on Olga Rudge. Although musicologists continue to credit Alfredo Casella, he was a figurehead; Olga was the moving force behind the Venice Settimana Vivaldiana of 1939, which laid the groundwork for Vivaldi's post-war popularity with the rise of the LP record (Adams 1975). In 1948, possibly because of Olga's immediacy, Bedford confessed to Dorothy that she was 'not convinced as to exceptional interest of Vivaldi', but that she had not heard performances (24 February 1948).

During Pound's confinement at St Elizabeths, Bedford continued frequent correspondence with both Pound and Dorothy. Suffering from arthritis in her hands, her opportunities for performance had dried up – she confessed to Dorothy in a 1946 letter that she had not played for years – but she continued going to concerts for a while, then became content staying at home with the BBC. In 1947, she reported going 'to hear what remains of the Dolmetsch family' (22 July 1947), and in 1948 described Wyndham Lewis and Peter Russell reading from the *Pisan Cantos* to a large crowd (26 November 1948). In 1948, Archie Harding at the BBC renewed interest in broadcasting *Cavalcanti*, but the music could not be found (Fisher 2002: 202). Bedford shared her curiosity about the rising newcomer Benjamin Britten: she had not yet heard *Peter Grimes*, but *Albert Herring* is 'not funny, just silly'. *The Rape of Lucrece* is 'much better' (20 November 1947). Archie Harding, still at the BBC, proposed a 'rapprochement with Britten' and Ronald Duncan, once editor of *Townsmen* and librettist of Britten's *Lucrece*, 'seems to favor it': 'I daresay it's OK though I don't quite see where it leads' (26 November 1948). In 1950, she attended a performance of T. S. Eliot's *Cocktail Party* and found it 'a terrible let down' (to Dorothy, 16 July 1950). By 23 February 1953, she reported 'not being anywhere in music now'. She enjoyed Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress*, but her former life was eluding her. Although Raymonde Collignon was still in touch, 'Ferrari has been dead for some years – Maitland I don't know – where is Tinayre?' She keeps being asked for the Antheil MS, which she has never seen. 'My copy of the libretto is in the hands of Peter Russell.' The whereabouts of various copies of the opera MSS is a recurring puzzle in the letters.

When Bedford heard that Wyndham Lewis was blind and dying, she arrived with offers of help – offers that met with mixed emotions from Froanna, who gradually convinced herself that 'Twin' and her dying husband had resumed their affair. For her part, Bedford spent hours helping Lewis with correspondence and reading to him: Orwell's novels, Toynbee's *Study of History* (O'Keefe 2000: 569–70). Shortly after Lewis died, she wrote to Dorothy, describing a projected new edition of *Time and Western Man*:

I was reading him that book – He was really distressed when we came to the chapter on EP & was discussing with me whether we could cut it out entirely or whether he should make apologies to Ezra in his new preface, or a repudiation or something. . . . I would like Ezra to know that was his intention – I was pleased, as it had been bothering me for 30 years. (Agnes Bedford to Dorothy Pound, 8 April 1957)

After Pound's release from St Elizabeths and when his final years of silence, illness and severe depression set in, Bedford was stunned to receive a letter severing their long years of friendship. Bedford's reply is full of pain, but tempered with understanding: 'Dearest Ezra', she wrote on 7 September 1963,

I suppose I ought to be reconciled to the fact that you are not interested to hear from me any longer. Naturally, after some forty years of regular correspondence, I miss our exchanges, but I bow to your rule. . . . I know you are ill, and fed up, and keep having to undergo horrible operations, but I can't see why this makes you want to jettison all your works, and all your values, and throw us all overboard. In heaven's name what stars are we supposed to steer by now? Nearly all the most agreeable things in my life have stemmed from you, so now, here I am standing up for you, against yourself. (YCAL 43 4/149)

This moving letter includes a note reporting a visit from Pound's grandson, as well as a visit from a young Canadian musician named Murray Schafer. Schafer of course went on to produce a second performance of Pound's *Villon* for the BBC Third Programme, as well as edit Pound's music criticism for *New Directions*, all with Bedford's cooperation and blessing. 'I was very interested to read Schafer's letter – He has such a good mind, hasn't he? One of the few people who really *thinks!*' she wrote to Dorothy on 19 June 1966. 'I do think he's the perfect person for the job – Highly intelligent – extremely fine musician. Very sensitive, and yet so calm and capable' (19 June 1966). By this time, Bedford herself was showing the weariness of a long, eventful life. Schafer had been pressuring *New Directions* to publish the Antheil score of *Villon*. Bedford approved, half-heartedly: 'If Ezra does not object I suppose there is no reason why Laughlin should not print a copy of Ezra's original MSS of the testament – I have not seen it [Antheil's score]. . . . Like you, I can't see any particular purpose in publishing it' (to Dorothy, 19 November 1967). Her opinion was much closer to the mark back in 1948, when she wrote that she 'Was, am, sensible of some highly exceptional quality in EP's own music – which shone through any amount of clumsiness he may have shown in manipulating medium' (to Dorothy, 24 February 1948). She gave Schafer what help she could with his projects, and he returned the favour by dedicating *Ezra Pound and Music* very appropriately to her memory.

Notes

1. She is named as accompanist on Blanche Marchesi's recordings from c. 1936: 'When I am laid at rest' from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, Reger's 'Nun wandre Maria', Ernest Moret's 'La lettre' and the traditional 'Sicilian Cart Driver's Song'. This last is released on a CD entitled *Prima Voce Party* (Nimbus: NI7839). There may be others, as an accompanist's name was often not credited. Other singers associated with Pound's operas have left recordings. Yves Tinayre, for example, recorded much early music, now hard to find. At the time of writing, I have found several of these online at YouTube, including Blanche Marchesi with Agnes Bedford, Yvette Guilbert with Gustave Ferrari, Raymonde Collignon and Basil Radford.

2. In 1968, Bedford was surprised to learn of Grace Crawford: 'Many years before I knew him she was trying to notate his compositions – what she described was exactly what I remember – the difficulty of interpreting the sounds he sang & the picking out notes on the piano, & the impossibility of barring his rhythms' (Agnes Bedford to Dorothy Pound, 6 January 1968. Lilly Library, Pound Mss. II).
3. Bedford was frustrated by what she saw as 'incompetence' at the BBC (Fisher 2002: 129–30).
4. The Beinecke holdings are held in YCAL MSS 43, Box 4, folders 147, 148, and 149, and in the William Bird Ezra Pound Papers, YCAL MSS 178, Box 1, folder 2. The Lilly Library holdings are mainly in the Dorothy Pound collection (Pound Mss. II), and some in the D.G. Bridson collection.