The Operatic Imperative in Anglo-American Literary Modernism: Pound, Stein, and Woolf

by

Kimberly Rose Fairbrother Canton

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
University of Toronto

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Abstract

It is generally agreed that modernism is a period and movement rich in interdisciplinary collaboration. What is often contentious in understandings of the modernist period is to whom modernist artists addressed their projects. On the one hand, traditional scholarship has tended to view modernism as an essentially elitist project practiced among a closed set orbiting around British and American expatriate coteries: Ezra Pound and his “Ezuversity,” Stein and her Paris Salon, Woolf and the Bloomsbury circle. On the other hand, recent scholarship in modernism has sought to expand the field to included modernisms practiced in different time periods, in different countries, and by a wider range of artists. While my project is firmly situated in the work of the so-called high modernists, my operatically focused approach, which sees Pound, Stein, and Woolf engaging directly with mass culture by way of opera (albeit in different ways and to different aims), suggests that we need to re-think the way in which we have mythologized the period, even where these “high” modernists are concerned.

In chapter one, I read Pound’s operatic endeavors as alternative means of translation. Though these pedagogical projects valorize the art they “translate” for its
unique difficulty, the use of opera and later, radio opera, as the means to translate this art demonstrates an interest in democratizing this difficulty. This is a remarkable inconsistency given Pound’s undisputedly fascist allegiances. Chapter two, which focuses on Stein’s *Four Saints in Three Acts*, shows how the prospect of writing an opera helped Stein to forge a new connection between playwright and audience in the theatre. What I am calling the “envoiced landscape” is an anti-patriarchal, enabling alternative to teleologically driven narrative that defeats authorial control by way of play. Chapters three and four turn to Woolf’s conspicuously hybrid novels, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*. Both works question the nineteenth-century notion of music’s capacity to transcend language, embracing instead a distinctly operatic frame of reference, as Woolf celebrates the novel as an omnivorous but democratic, open-ended, contingent form, endlessly capable of incorporating and co-opting other genres. Whereas *The Waves* enacts a critique of the Gesamtkunstwerk played out on the Wagnerian stage, *Between the Acts* considers the social text played out among opera’s audiences, positing, then critiquing, a Brechtian reevaluation of Wagnerian aesthetics.
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Shorter versions of the Pound chapter were read at the 2007 Music and Lyrics Symposium at the University of Toronto at Scarborough and the 2008 ACCUTE conference at the University of British Columbia. I would like to thank the panelists and respondents at both conferences for their helpful questions and comments. In particular, I would like to thank Katie Larson and Andrew Dubois for their careful readings of an article-length version of the Pound chapter forthcoming in a special issue on Music and Lyrics in *University of Toronto Quarterly*.

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This thesis is for my Mom, Frances Fairbrother, who gifted me with a love for the two arts upon which this work is based; my delightful baby girl, Mercedes Sophia, whose beautiful smile inspires me every day to live up to the standard of excellence set by my mother; and my husband, Joaquin Canton, whose unwavering love, support, humor, and intellect has made this work achievable, enjoyable, and meaningful.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>i</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Abbreviations</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera and Literary Modernism</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezuversity in the Opera “House”: Pound’s Operatic Translations</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Envoiced Landscape: Opera, Narrative, and <em>Four Saints in Three Acts</em></td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woolf Contra Wagner? Moments of the <em>Gesamtkunstwerk</em> in <em>The Waves</em></td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Trobe’s Failure; Woolf’s Success: Brechtian Overtones in <em>Between the Acts</em></td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Consulted</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for frequently sited works.

LA

LE

EP’s Radio Operas

EP and Music

EPP
Ezra Pound Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

ORP
Olga Rudge Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
Introduction
Opera and Literary Modernism

Though Gertrude Stein’s comments about opera were often ambiguous,¹ in her lecture, “Plays” (1935), she singles out Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s early modernist opera, *Elektra* (1908), as a positive example of how literary dramatists might rethink how things are done on stage:

I did sometimes think about the opera. I went to the opera once in Venice and I liked it and then much later Strauss’ Electra [sic] made me realize that in a kind of a way there could be a solution of the problem of conversation on the stage. Besides it was a new opera and it is quite exciting to hear something unknown really unknown. (LA 117)

Stein’s comment is interesting, not only for the emphasis it puts on opera’s ability to solve dramatic problems, but also for its description of *Elektra’s* “newness.” For an author as concerned with exploding realms of representation as Stein was, calling any opera “something unknown really unknown” at first seems odd. Opera, so the common thinking goes, is the tired melodramatic plots of *verismo opera*, the clichéd laughter of *opera buffa*, the Teutonic grandiosity of *Musikdrama*. It is the “extravagant art,” as critic Herbert Lindenberger calls it, or in W. H. Auden’s words, “the last refuge of the High style” (116). It is, to borrow a phrase James Weldon Johnson uses to describe “Negro” dialect, “an instrument with but two complete stops, pathos and humor” (7).

¹ As I will discuss in some detail in chapter two, Stein frequently seems to contradict herself when she talks about opera. Characteristic of this ambiguity are her other comments about opera in “Plays” (113, 117), as well as her comments in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (83, 88).
But when *Elektra*’s predecessor, Strauss’s *Salome*, premiered in 1905, the way in which opera was conceived and perceived shifted dramatically, making room for its eventual evolution into an artistic vehicle more than equal to the task demanded of it by the avant-garde—an avant-garde that included a diverse range of literary modernists captivated and tempted by the possibilities afforded by this “opera made new,” to appropriate Ezra Pound’s famous slogan: MAKE IT NEW. Pound wrote three operas, two of which were written for the radio, and in addition to the two opera libretti set to music by Virgil Thomson, Gertrude Stein wrote a number of purely literary “operas.” In the 1920s, James Joyce seriously contemplated collaborating on an opera with George Antheil.2 William Carlos Williams wrote a three-act opera libretto entitled *The First President* (1936).3 Bertolt Brecht wrote five operas with Kurt Weill, and others with Paul

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2 For an account of the Joyce/Antheil opera that never happened, and a reprint of a three-bar extract from the projected work, see Paul Martin’s article, “‘Mr. Bloom and the Cyclops’: Joyce and Antheil’s Unfinished ‘Opéra Mécanique.’” Martin hints that more of the opera, based on the “Cyclops” episode in *Ulysses*, might have been completed (96). Joyce also endeavored to have Antheil write an opera based on Byron’s *Cain* as a vehicle for the Irish tenor John Sullivan, and, when that failed, suggested the idea to the Swiss composer Othmar Schoeck, but the project never materialized (Ellmann 626-7, 669). Virgil Thomson also recalls Joyce approaching him with a collaborative project:

> in the mid-1930s, after my opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* . . . had received some recognition, Joyce offered me his own collaboration, I demurred, as Picasso had done, and for the same reasons. I did not feel like wounding Gertrude Stein, or choose to ride on both ends of a seesaw. What Joyce proposed was a ballet, to be based on the children’s games chapter of *Finnegans Wake*. He gave me a hand-printed edition of that chapter, with an initial designed by his daughter Lucia; and he offered me, for the final spectacle, production at the Paris Opéra with choreography by Léonide Massine. I did not doubt that a ballet could be derived from the subject. My reply, however, after reading the chapter, was that though anyone could put children’s games on a stage, only with his text would such a presentation have “Joyce quality.” I did not add that in place of the pure dance-spectacle proposed, one could imagine a choreographed cantata using Joyce’s words. (*Virgil Thomson* 77-8)

3 Virgil Thomson very nearly had a hand in writing music for Williams’s libretto. In a response to an unnamed correspondent presumably inquiring about Williams’s relationship to painting, Thomson writes: [Williams’s] desire to hear his own lines sung, universal among poets, brought him to me with the G. Washington play. I took it he had been encouraged by my opera (text by Gertrude Stein) *Four Saints in Three Acts*. I declined the collaboration not at all on poetic grounds but because I found his work short on stage instinct. (Most modern poets lack a *sens du théâtre*.)

As for Pound, I imagine he came naturally through Provençal poetry to wonder whether the modern poetry-and-music divorce was permanent. His opera on Villon’s *Testament* essayed
Hindemith, Hanns Eisler, and Paul Dessau. From 1931 to 1934, Zora Neale Hurston produced several opera-like musicals/revues. Langston Hughes’s many musical collaborations include several opera libretti, as well as part of the lyrics to Kurt Weill’s *Street Scene*. Together with Eric Crozier, E. M. Forster wrote the libretto to Benjamin Britten’s opera, *Billy Budd* (1951). In addition to translating a number of opera libretti into English, W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman wrote the libretti for five original operas, including *The Rake’s Progress* (1951) with Igor Stravinsky, written in the same year as *Billy Budd*. Later, Lillian Hellman wrote an original libretto for Leonard Bernstein’s operetta, *Candide* (1956).

Nevertheless, the academic study of opera within the context of literary modernism has not been nearly as widespread as the interest in and involvement with the genre among the modernists. The notable exception is James Joyce: in Joyce studies, the interplay of music and words has historically received a great deal of attention, much of

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4 For a detailed exploration of the interconnectedness of Brecht’s theatre and opera, see Joy Calico’s *Brecht at the Opera*.

5 It is difficult to categorize these works. Hurston produced four in total: *The Great Day* (1931), *From Sun to Sun* (1932), *Singing Steel* (1934) and *All de Live Long Day* (1934). All but the last were based on similar material. They developed out of Hurston’s conviction that “the Negro material is eminently suited to drama and music. . . . In fact, it is drama and music and the world and America in particular needs what this folk material holds” (qtd. in Boyd 227). The performances consisted of loosely scripted dramas told through folk song and dance, the music of which was compiled rather than newly-composed. Hurston was careful to distinguish her programs from both Broadway musicals and “mediocre revues” (Boyd 229). At the same time, Valerie Boyd suggests that Hall Johnson’s Broadway hit, *Run, Little Chillun*, was inspired by *The Great Day* (231).

6 Each also wrote a libretto singly: Auden wrote the libretto for *Paul Bunyan* (Benjamin Britten, 1941); Kallman collaborated with Carlos Chávez’s on *Panfilo and Lauretta* (1957), later performed as *Love Propitiated* (1961).
which is now being related to his preoccupation with opera. Although the analysis of sound (not music) in modernist writing is increasingly gaining more attention, analyses of the relationship between opera and modernist writers are still rather limited—even for modernists who wrote opera. Margaret Fisher and Robert Hughes have been effective ambassadors for Pound’s operas, and their work as scholars and musicians has done much to explicate, publicize, and historicize his operatic endeavors; still, his operas remain on the fringes of Pound scholarship. As more work is done on opera from perspectives other than musicology, modernist operas are frequently studied by literary scholars or from literary perspectives, a practice that has considerably opened up the study of the genre, and several studies on the interrelationship of music and literature in modernism have addressed important operas as a part of their project. But the main questions that I am exploring—how opera functioned as a quasi-literary genre in the modernist period; why particular literary modernists were attracted to it; and how this attraction manifested itself in works in and out of the opera house—are not taken up as a study in their own right in any of the current literature.

What I am calling the operatic imperative in the work of the modernists that I will discuss is characterized by different concerns and reflected in different ways. Pound, the

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7 The work on music and Joyce began with Hodgart (1959), Bowen (1974), and Bauerle (1982; 1993). Since then, edited collections (Bowen, Knowles), as well as individual book-length studies (Hodgart and Bauerle, Martin, Weaver) have continued to expand the field. For a more complete catalogue, see Bauerle’s “James Joyce and Opera: A Bibliography” in the James Joyce Quarterly special issue devoted to Joyce and opera.

8 Daniel Albright’s work is at the fore of interdisciplinary studies in modernism, particularly where music and modernism is concerned. His Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources (2004) is an important resource, as is the earlier Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature and the Other Arts (2000). Brad Bucknell’s Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics: Pater, Pound, Joyce and Stein (2001) is an essential text. Christopher Butler’s Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe, 1900-1916 is a comprehensive introduction to early modernism among the arts. Though Albright and Bucknell address Pound’s and Stein’s operas as a part of their projects, their work is more generally focused on the intersection of music and literature in the modernist period, not opera and literature.
poet, becomes an opera composer. Stein, the dramatist, becomes a librettist. Virginia Woolf, the prose stylist, writes novels that challenge generic boundaries and posit a post-Wagnerian aesthetic. In each of these cases, however, the projects are linked by their representation and presentation of opera as a viable artistic vehicle for the avant-garde and by their overt focus on opera’s *literary* dimension. As T. S. Eliot noted in his 1921 “London Letter” for the *Dial*: “music that is to be taken like operatic music, music accompanying and explained by an action, must have a drama which has been put through the same process of development as the music itself” (in *Annotated Waste Land* 189). Opera is, and has always been, as much a literary as a musical form: it is always based on a written text. But as the very word —“the diminutive *libretto*”—used for the literary text in opera indicates (Hutcheon, “State of the Art” 802), opera’s musical dimension has historically overshadowed its literary roots, reducing it, in criticism and performance, to a primarily musical text. While the literary focus in Pound’s operatic translations ironically replicates the musical bias in opera by aspiring to what Walter Pater saw as the formally unifying condition of music, Stein’s and Woolf’s operatic endeavors challenge this hierarchy by looking to the possibilities afforded by opera’s pluralism—by the multiplicity of texts that it incorporates and the multiplicity of readings it generates. All of the operatic projects I look at, however, from Pound’s radio operas and Stein and Thomson’s smash hit, to Woolf’s “operatic” novels, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*, engage with opera’s audiences in ways that force us to re-think traditional perceptions about modernism’s elitism and difficulty.

In the next two chapters, I examine how operas composed and written by Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, respectively, differently test the operatic and literary
conventions already exploded by modernist opera. Chapter one challenges common assumptions about modernism’s elitism and its supposed rejection of mass culture through a discussion of Pound’s use of opera as a translation medium in his two completed “radio” operas, *Le Testament* (1923/1933-34) and *Cavalcanti* (1933). Chapter two revolves around Stein and Thomson’s *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1933), though the questions I ask about Stein’s attraction to the operatic genre show how integral opera is to Stein’s developing aesthetic, particularly in terms of her work as a literary dramatist. I’ve chosen to focus on Pound and Stein in the first part of this study for several reasons. Both authors are key modernists whose operas are more often associated with their librettists than with their composers (even when these two are the same, as in Pound). Unlike Forster and Crozier’s libretto for Britten’s *Billy Budd*, which is written in 1951, or Auden and Kallman’s for Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress* (1951), Stein’s and Pound’s operas more closely stick to the traditional “high” modernist time-frame, and clearly exhibit modernist preoccupations. And finally, although significant work has been done on Pound’s operas and *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the importance of the genre to which these works belong has not been addressed.

The final two chapters turn away from literary modernists practicing their art in the opera house to focus on the operatic imperative in Virginia Woolf’s most conspicuously hybrid novels, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*. In chapter three, I show how the explicit Wagnerian intertext in *The Waves* serves to modify the aesthetics of totality celebrated by the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to reflect more accurately the fragmented reality addressed by the novel. Woolf’s focus on the audience in *Between the Acts*, explored in chapter four, shows how Woolf, in her final novel, takes the Wagnerian
alternative one step further. As I will explain, though the pageant in *Between the Acts* replicates Brecht’s Epic Theatre, the novel itself, which *anticipates* the critical limitations inherent in Brecht’s didactic theatre, embraces opera’s inconsistencies to model an alternative to the dictatorially charged total work of art.

**Modernism’s Interdisciplinarity**

My understanding of modernism as both movement and historical period is central to my examination of the operatic imperative in the work of Pound, Stein, and Woolf. Different than areas of literary study designated by a historical timeframe only (Early Modern, Restoration, Victorian), the modernist period is also an “ism.” Though the period is usually bracketed by the years 1890 and 1945, all early twentieth-century literature is by no means modernist (think of Thomas Hardy, Theodore Dreiser, Wilfred Owen); equally, work that falls outside of this timeframe is routinely categorized as modernist (Samuel Beckett, W. H. Auden, Henry James). Like romanticism or classicism, modernism is the artistic expression of, or response to, a given time. But

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9 In music, as in literature and the other arts, “Modernism is a consequence of the fundamental conviction among successive generations of composers since 1900 that the means of musical expression in the 20th century must be adequate to the unique and radical character of the age” (Botstein). Therefore, modernism *is* historically situated—the term does denote a specific historical moment—but it is not only a historical moment: it is the nature of the artistic reaction to the moment, not the mere historical situatedness of the artistic work that makes something modernist. That said, I would not wish to posit a definition of modernism that outlined specific characteristics. Albright’s characterization of modernism as “a testing of the limits of aesthetic construction” (*Modernism and Music* 11) is as specific a definition as I would be comfortable advancing. Indeed, the modernism of each of the authors I shall discuss is very different; the term “modernisms” is undoubtedly more apt. While I am sympathetic to the inclusiveness Susan Stanford Friedman would effect in her re-definition of modernism as “the expressive dimension of modernity” (433), for the purposes of my project, which is tracing an historical shift in opera in the first half of the twentieth century and its reflection in literary modernism, it is more productive to limit my parameters to the usual period understood as modernist.

10 In music history, the Viennese school of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven (c. 1730-1820) is called the classical period, but it actually historically coincides with the romantic period in literature. The romantic period in music (c. 1815-1910), on the other hand, reaches its apex much later, when ideas of romanticism in literature were already giving way to realism and symbolism. Although all of these labels were attached retroactively to these periods, and although there is ongoing scholarly debate as to when the respective
unlike these “isms,” it is a movement that affected all facets of the arts at the same time. The importance of this sense of historical simultaneity to my project cannot be underestimated: indeed, it is a significant contributing factor in the literary recourse to opera that I explore. More than perhaps any other period in English literature, modernism is unique in the extent to which its practitioners consistently crossed traditional disciplinary boundaries in their unremitting quest to, in Pound’s famous formulation, “MAKE IT NEW.” Think of Stein and her productive friendships with Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Juan Gris, and Georges Braque, among others; Pound, Antheil, and their Treatise on Harmony; Edith Sitwell, composer William Walton, and their poetic/musical spectacle, Façade; Forster’s pageant plays to music by Vaughan Williams; W. B. Yeats’s adaptation of Noh theatre, Fighting the Waves (1929), with music by Antheil—these are just a handful of the numerous collaborations among modernists, not to mention the many non-collaborative, cross-disciplinary forays of

periods in both music and literature actually began and ended, the discrepancy between the names of the periods is not merely a matter of semantics (for an overview of the particular problems of dating and attaching an historical label to nineteenth-century music, see the introduction to Carl Dahlhaus’s Nineteenth-Century Music). Even taking into account the Sturm und Drang of late Beethoven (undeniably the most “romantic” of the big three classical composers), the Viennese classical style celebrates a sense of clarity and maintains a concern with form that is distinct from the sense of impromptu expression and passionate display of the romantic heroes of the nineteenth century, like Liszt, Schumann, and Wagner, who instead mirror in their compositions and lives Wordsworth’s romantic sense of poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (246). It is worth noting that the German composer and writer E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1882) characterized not only Beethoven, but also Mozart and Haydn, as romantic. Thus it might appear that our distinction between classicism and romanticism is anachronistic, and in its own time, “Romanticism was clearly identified as a movement concurrent with Classicism rather than a period succeeding it” (Samson). But Hoffmann could not have understood romanticism in the sense that we use the word to describe music today; his assessment draws on a German tradition that viewed music as essentially romantic, a tradition discernable in the following comment by Robert Schumann: “it is scarcely credible that a distinct Romantic school could be formed in music, which is itself Romantic” (qtd. in Samson).

Though Albright’s claim that “music became the vanguard medium of the Modernist aesthetic” is debatable (see Modernism and Music 1-2), and while it is undoubtedly true that all areas/periods are characterized by some degree of interdisciplinarity, the unprecedented extent to which the modernist aesthetic exploded in the arts simultaneously seems to mark the period itself as the ultimate expression of Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk.
literary modernists like Wyndham Lewis, D. H. Lawrence, and Pound. The evidence of this kind of sustained attention to interdisciplinary collaboration within modernism makes interdisciplinary study of modernism more than a desirable goal; it makes maintaining the disciplinary distinctions that were actively challenged by the artists under examination almost impossible. As Robin Gail Schulze puts it: “thinking broadly and widely is just what many modernist authors did best. . . . [T]hey wandered across boundaries of time and place, borrowing from sister arts, rummaging the cupboards of the distant past, exploring non-western cultures, casting and recasting themselves and their art in an ongoing intellectual journey that demanded and valued change” (5).

Nowhere is modernism’s interdisciplinarity better exemplified than the event that serves to introduce Modris Ekstein’s classic historical study of the early modernist period, *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*: the Ballets Russes production of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*. What would not be achieved in literature until 1922 with the tripartite publication of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* was achieved in music in 1913 with the Paris premiere of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*, a work whose relentless and haunting ostinato came to define, for a time, the modernist musical aesthetic. Though there are many modernist “moments” that one could point to as defining the period (the Armory Show, also in 1913, for instance), and though several important modernist texts predate the magic year of 1922 or, for that matter, 1913 (Stein’s *Three Lives*, published in 1909, 12)

Eksteins provides one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the multiple, conflicting accounts of the infamous premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps* (10-16). As he notes, Stein is only one of the many modernists to sensationalize (or fabricate) her experience with “this early twentieth-century ‘happening’” (15).
is one such example), the cultural importance of *Le Sacre* goes far beyond its musical—or even artistic—significance. For Eliot, writing for the *Dial* in 1921, Stravinsky’s music seemed to “transform the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life; and to transform these despairing noises into music” (in *Annotated Waste Land* 189). As Eksteins writes: “*The Rite of Spring*, which was first performed in Paris in May 1913, a year before the outbreak of war, is, with its rebellious energy and its celebration of life through sacrificial death, perhaps the emblematic *oeuvre* of a twentieth-century world that, in its pursuit of life, has killed off millions of its best human beings” (xiv). To these descriptions I would add the spectacular sense of interdisciplinary collaboration showcased in the work as it was first apprehended, not as a piece of program music, but as a ballet commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev, director of the Ballets Russes.

The example of the Ballets Russes, about which Carl Van Vechten rhapsodized “[t]he arts have grouped themselves in the glowing splendor of the Russian Ballet production” (*Music After the Great War* 20), proved prophetic, as numerous subsets within modernism—the Bloomsbury Group, Vorticism, Futurism, and even Dadaism—became characterized by an interdisciplinary, collaborative spirit predicated on the free exchange of ideas from artists of disparate disciplines. For Van Vechten, the secret of...

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13 Discussing Scriabin in the same essay, Van Vechten, in an aside, notes: “[Scriabin’s] synchronism of music, light, and perfumes was never realized in his own music, although the Russian Ballet has completely realized it. (How cleverly that organization—or is it a movement?—has seized everybody’s good ideas, from Wagner’s to Adolphe Appia’s!)” (*Music After the Great War* 23).

14 Most of the members of the Bloomsbury group were writers (Virginia Woolf, Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster, David Garnett) or visual artists (Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant), but the lesser-known musician, Saxon Sydney-Turner, was also associated with the group, and later in her life,
the success of the Ballets Russes was its collaborative element, which modeled the concept of democracy:

Irony certainly directed the workings of fate when it was decreed, in this age of individualism, that the group-spirit should dominate the movements of the theatre, an institution in which, not so many years ago, the individual reigned, his head crowned with bays. Democracy has two effects: it strengthens the individual and it gives him the power to join with other individuals in fostering the growth of his ideals. (Music After the Great War 47)

In contradistinction to the dictatorial, totalizing approach of Richard Wagner, to whom Van Vechten is surely alluding in the last clause of the first sentence, the modern work of art’s engagement with myriad art forms succeeds because it incorporates difference. As we shall see, the notion of collaboration is problematic in the operatic works of the authors I discuss: Pound’s “collaborators” were more amanuenses than partners, and Stein and Thomson worked separately. Nevertheless, as what Nelson Goodman would distinguish as an allographic, rather than autographic, genre, opera is, by its very nature, a collaborative art form (113-15). And though Woolf herself did not collaborate at all, she does invoke the democracy of the “group spirit” Van Vechten praises by directly critiquing the monomania of Wagnerian aesthetics in The Waves and by representing the audience as collaborator in Between the Acts, a text in which the Ballets Russes are

Woolf had a close friendship with the composer Ethyl Smyth. Though Vorticism was primarily a visual arts movement, Pound, who named the movement, was strongly associated with it, as was Wyndham Lewis. The Futurists, in essays like Bruno Corra’s “Abstract Cinema—Chromatic Music” (1912), which describes experimental music with color pianos, Enrico Prampolini’s “Chromophony—the Colours of Sounds” (1913), or Carlo Carrà’s “The Painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells” (1913), experimented with synesthetic processes demanding interdisciplinary collaboration. Similarly, the broad principles governing Dadaism were expressed in a variety of artistic mediums, from Kurt Schwitter’s sound poems to Tristan Tzara’s manifesto.
directly alluded to at one point: “[The trees] were regular enough to suggest . . . columns in an open-air cathedral, a place where swallows darting seemed, by the regularity of the trees, to make a pattern, dancing, like the Russians, only not to music, but to the unheard rhythm of their own wild hearts” (41).

**Wagner’s Muddy Legacy**

For anybody concerned with opera, interdisciplinarity, or collaboration among the arts in the first half of the twentieth century, Richard Wagner is an inescapable figure. Making one’s way through the often convoluted and contradictory logic of Wagner’s voluminous prose can be a frustrating experience indeed, particularly because it is a model example of how rarely theory accords with praxis. For my purposes here, however, it is not necessary to take up the intricacies in Wagnerian thought because that to which most modernists were responding when they invoked Wagner was “the phenomenon we label ‘Wagner’” (Lindenberger, *Extravagant Art* 219), which can be broken down, fairly or not, into two interrelated concepts: the totalizing effect of the Gesamtkunstwerk and the “narcotic” effect of the music.15

As Ernst Krenek makes clear in his essay, “Is Opera Still Possible Today?” (1936), there have been many reforms to opera prior to Wagner’s attempt to defeat the “frivolous” operas of his time with his own “earnest” works (Wagner, *On Music and Drama* 95); indeed, the *Prima la musica, poi le parole* debate that seems to structure

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15 The very interesting critical work on Wagner that continues to be produced proves this characterization of the Wagnerian legacy to be a gross simplification. As Hilda Brown’s corrective study of Brecht’s indebtedness to Wagnerian music-drama and theory reminds us, the effect of the semantic “density” of Wagnerian opera is paradoxical: “drawing us in through the most expressive and beguiling means, while at the same time, through the orchestra’s special function of perspectival commentary, requiring us to use all our critical faculties and apply ourselves to the business of uncovering the hidden meanings below the surface level” (64). It is in fact likely that it is this paradoxical effect that kept modernists talking about Wagner, rather than dismissing him out right.
most of these “reforms” can be traced back earlier than even the 1786 Antonio Salieri opera of the same name. From Gluck to Wagner to Brecht and Weill, opera reforms throughout the genre’s relatively short history have all seemed aimed at “giving the intellectual content of the language and drama a new, more crucial position” (Krenek 99; for an historicized sketch of this debate see Lindenberger, Extravagant Art 56-65).

Wagner’s reform, particularly as it is spelled out in the early treatises written before the Ring was completed, “Artwork of the Future” (1849) and “Opera and Drama” (1851), aimed to reinstate into opera the centrality of the dramatic element as it was thought to have existed in ancient Greek theatre, the supposed model for the earliest operas. This is in fact the logic behind his neologism Musikdrama, though it should be noted that in a later essay, “On the Term ‘Music-Drama’” (1872), he rejected this term for the perceived lack of prominence it accorded to music, preferring instead to describe his operas as the “actions of the music become visible” (Wagner’s Aesthetics 58).

Perhaps the chief irony of Wagnerian opera for modernists is that the theatrical and literary imperative in the Gesamtkunstwerk—which was the prime motivation behind Wagner’s original reform—is in practice drowned out by music so emotionally powerful it is commonly described as a narcotic that renders its audience spellbound but critically passive. As Theodor Adorno puts it: “[t]his technological hostility to consciousness is the very foundation of the music drama. It combines arts in order to produce an intoxicating brew” (In Search of Wagner 100). Adorno’s comment reflects the common modernist perception that Wagner’s “reform” was actually undone by the overwhelming effect of its own technique, the total theatricality of the Gesamtkunstwerk:
There are two aesthetic ideals: the Wagnerian . . . you confuse the spectator by smacking as many of his senses as possible at every possible moment; this prevents his noting anything with unusual lucidity . . . . The other aesthetic . . . aims at focusing the mind on a given definition of form, of rhythm, so intensely that it becomes not only aware of that given form, but more sensitive to all other forms, rhythms, defined planes, or masses. (Pound, Treatise 44)

As we will see, Pound’s statement itself becomes ironic when viewed against his own practice as an opera composer, where he becomes suspiciously Wagnerian in his explicit and authoritarian insistence that the sole purpose of the non-literary components of the operas is to work together to translate the Troubadour texts that comprise the libretti. Nevertheless, the statement is characteristic of the widespread modernist sense that the all-consuming totality of the Gesamtkunstwerk constituted not just the apotheosis of German romanticism, but was in fact Wagner’s most important—and damning—artistic legacy.

Certainly this is the legacy Martin Puchner outlines in Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama to set up his reading of modernist anti-theatricality. While I find Puchner’s reading of Wagner’s “invention of theatricality as a value” convincing on the whole (55), I disagree with his dismissive characterization of Wagner’s return to music as it is outlined in the composer’s later writings as “moments of doubt in Wagner’s theatricality of gestures” (48-9)—though I do not disagree with Puchner’s essential point about Wagner’s innate sense of theatricality. At the end of the day, Wagner approached his operas as a composer, and it is on the quality of his music that his stature as an artist
rests. In Cosima Wagner’s diaries, she claims Wagner himself admitted as much: “I didn’t dare to say that it was music which produced drama, although inside myself I knew it” (457). Of course, as Joseph Kerman was the first to remind us, and as my discussion of Stein shall highlight, opera is not just the combination of words and music, but also a dramatic form. That said, it is a form of drama guided by musical principles: “Music articulates the drama, and we can no more suppose that a small composer can write a great opera than that a poetaster can make a great play” (Kerman 17). This is not to say that Wagner was not supremely concerned with drama or that his operas (or music, for that matter) do not reflect the innate sense of theatricality Puchner outlines, or even that it was not, in part, this sense of theatricality to which modernists responded, often negatively. But to suggest that Wagner, particularly after reading Schopenhauer, was not primarily motivated by musical form, to deny that he was attempting to attain the autonomy of absolute music in his operas, or to concentrate only on the theatrical elements of the music, is overstating the point. Krenek speaks for most thinkers in the modernist period when he notes: “Wagner’s doctrine of the total work of art is now revealed as an auxillary construction to support his internal musical innovations” (107). On the other hand, to inject into Puchner’s argument the more than equally important formal role that Wagner’s music plays (to remind us, that is, “that Wagner was not just a man of theater but an opera composer”), leads us to the “tantalizing, fantastical conclusion” Joy Calico sees in Puchner’s argument, in her operatically focused study of

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16 Dahlhaus’s analysis of the Wagnerian origin of the term “absolute music” provides a useful outline of the evolution of Wagner’s aesthetic from prima le parole to prima la musica (see chapter two of Idea of Absolute Music, especially 18-35). As Dahlhaus argues, “Wagner’s esthetic facade of a primarily dramatic ‘total work of art’ obscured his awareness of an ‘absolute music’ that formed the substance of music drama in the form of ‘orchestral melody’” (Idea of Absolute Music 41).
Brecht: if “modernist theater is directly descended from the modernist struggle with Wagner, and no one engaged more fully in that battle than Brecht,” then “modernist theater, of which epic theater has long been the standard-bearer, may be the illegitimate child of opera” (3).

As I shall take up in detail in my discussion of The Waves in chapter three, Wagner is not just the specter haunting the theatrical experiments in the modernist period, he is the specter also haunting modernist literary experiments—indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that he is the specter haunting modernism itself (see Lindenberger, Extravagant Art 219). Think of the Thames-daughters in The Waste Land, singing the Rhinemaidens’ “Weilala leia / Wallala leilala” (65, 66); Woolf’s repeated invocation of the opera Parsifal in The Waves; the scores of allusions to Wagner that Timothy Martin uncovers in Joyce and Wagner: A Study of Influence; or Margaret Schlegel’s famous denunciation of Wagner in chapter five of E. M. Forster’s Howards End:

Do you think music is so different to pictures? . . . Now, my sister declares they’re just the same. We have great arguments over it. . . . What is the good of the ear if it tells you the same as the eye? Helen’s one aim is to translate tunes into the language of painting, and pictures into the language of music. It’s very ingenious, and she says several pretty things in the process, but what’s gained, I’d like to know? Oh, it’s all rubbish, radically false. If Monet’s really Debussy and Debussy’s really Monet, neither gentleman is worth his salt—that’s my opinion. . . Now this very symphony [Beethoven’s Fifth] that we’ve just been having—she won’t let it alone. She labels it with meanings from start to finish; turns it into literature. I wonder if the day will ever return when music will be treated as
music. . . . There’s my brother behind us. He treats music as music, and oh, my goodness! he makes me angrier than anyone, simply furious. With him I daren’t even argue. . . . But, of course, the real villain is Wagner. He has done more than any man in the nineteenth century towards the muddling of arts. . . . Every now and then in history there do come these terrible geniuses, like Wagner, who stir up all the wells of thought at once. For a moment it’s splendid. Such a splash as never was. But afterwards—such a lot of mud; and the wells—as it were, they communicate with each other too easily now, and not one of them will run quite clear. That’s what Wagner’s done. (37)

Though Wagner is repeatedly called up in modernist fiction as a figure that represents collaboration among the sister arts, that is not quite what Margaret is getting at when she accuses him of “muddling the arts”; indeed, Wagner’s project was less about the “muddling” of the arts than the totalizing of the arts, to which the Gesamtkunstwerk (“together arts work”) refers.

What Margaret is blaming on Wagner actually stems from a much older debate that was brought into focus in the modernist period by the intense interest in Walter Pater’s claim in “The School of Giorgione,” that “all art constantly aspires to the condition of music” (86, italics in original). The essay appeared in The Renaissance (1877), a work that became famous for its Conclusion, in which Pater’s insistence on art for its own sake inspired a cult-like following, particularly among the Decadents, but also more generally among impressionable young men like Newland Archer in Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence (62), who also seems to want “to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame” (Pater 152). Pater does not want, as Margaret says of Helen, “to
translate tunes into the language of painting, and pictures into the language of music.” As he notes:

It is the mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music, and painting—all the various products of art—as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities of colour, in painting; of sound, in music; of rhythmical words, in poetry. (83)

At the same time, Pater acknowledges that “each art may be observed to pass through what German critics term an Anders-streben—a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of the other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces” (85). At its most basic level, Pater’s argument is interested in the way in which music might reciprocally lend to the other arts its unique capacity to merge matter and form, thus annihilating the discrepancy between the two: “[f]or while in all other forms of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it” (86).

Forster’s Margaret was hardly alone in her resistance to the muddling of the arts, which Pater’s dictate at first seems to imply and Wagner’s music dramas seem to celebrate. William Carlos Williams, for instance, explicitly denounces Pater’s position when he compares his poetry to music in the last prose section of Spring and All: “I do not believe that writing would gain in quality or force by seeking to attain to the

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17 In the essay, “Music at Night,” Aldous Huxley, too, privileges the merging of matter and form by making it a criterion of art: “The substance of a work of art is inseparable from its form; its truth and its beauty are two and yet, mysteriously, one” (Music at Night 46).
conditions of music” (536). For Williams, the only advantage of a musical association would be in the creation of words with onomatopoetic significance—words in which sound signifies meaning, to defeat the tyranny of “crude symbolism” (507). Indeed, the denunciation of the artistic “mud” that Margaret sees as Wagner’s legacy was famously articulated even before Wagner conceived of the Gesamtkunstwerk or Pater made his claim for music’s superiority. In Laocoön (1776), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing argued that art is essentially divided into two categories—the spatial and the temporal arts—neither of which should attempt to do the work of the other. His claim was revisited in the twentieth century with Irving Babbitt’s book, The New Laokoon (1910), which concludes by gendering the genre debate, casting the “feminine” predominance in the arts as “the great romantic . . . error” (249) and contrasting the two positions in terms of morality, distinguishing between the “clear-cut person” and the person “who lives in an emotional or an intellectual muddle” (247). Clement Greenberg’s “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940) appears much later and advances a different kind of argument but similarly seeks to explain through historical justification “the present superiority of abstract art” (37).

The debate in which all of these figures engage is particularly relevant to opera, because, more than any genre, opera demands the muddling of the arts. Opera cannot lay claim to the “pure form” of abstract art idealized in Greenberg’s article—even in works as strenuously desirous of autonomy as Wagner’s Musikdrama, as formally unified and musically controlled as Wozzeck, or as abstract and esoteric as Four Saints in Three Acts. As Dyneley Hussey notes in Eurydice; or, The Nature of Opera (1929), “the charge brought against opera, as a form, is that it is a hybrid, a mixture of oil and vinegar, a spoiling of two good things” (9), which is precisely the problem that thinkers like Lessing
and his advocates sought to avoid in artistic practices that borrowed the idiosyncrasies of one art form in the service of another.\textsuperscript{18} The attempt to emulsify words and music in opera, or as Eduard Hanslick describes it in \textit{On the Musically Beautiful} (1854, 1891), “the constraint which forces music and text into continually overstepping and yielding” is, as Hanslick notes, “the point from which all the inadequacies of opera originate” (23).

Given the “extravagance at the heart of the operatic expression,” its perceived absurdity and triviality, and its history as “mere” entertainment, the antioperatic prejudice, as Lindenberger, following Jonas Barish, labels it, would seem to preclude an operatic imperative in modernist art (see \textit{Extravagant Art} 197-218). But as we shall see, the literary modernists who wrote or invoked opera recognized that, as Hussey puts it, opera “is an art-form subject only to its own laws, which are not the same laws that govern either music or drama” (11). Rather than attempting only a perfect emulsion of words, drama, and music, to which Wagner seemed to aspire (and Strauss parodied in \textit{Capriccio}), or attempting to defeat opera’s entertainment value, modernists exploited the artistic possibilities of opera, viewing it as a site privileged for its inherent difficulty, multiplicity, and inconsistency. As Krenek, writing in 1936, puts it:

\begin{quote}
[The new element manifest in to-day’s opera] accepts the contradictions with which opera is reproached and tries to make them dialectically productive. . . . In contrast to Wagner, who aimed to make the medium of music-drama so tight and self-contained that it could exist autonomously side by side with—or best of all, instead of—spoken drama, they accept that there is a wide gulf between sung and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} Hussey’s book was written for “To-day and To-morrow” (1924-31), a series of over a hundred essay-length books on the future edited by C. K. Ogden. As the publishers note, the interdisciplinary series was designed to “provide the reader with a survey of numerous aspects of most modern thought.”
spoken drama and that the one is not an organic, gradual heightening of the
other, but an artificial world quite opposite to it. (102)

In modernist opera, the artistic “mud” that clouds critical perception in Wagnerian opera
becomes more like the “fertile” mud of collectivity out of which arise “[w]ords without
meaning—wonderful words” in Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (125).

**Opera After Wagner**

Though my focus throughout the present study is on the operatic imperative in the
work of literary modernists, a brief overview of modernist opera—opera after Wagner—
will help to contextualize my arguments in the succeeding chapters. *Salome* (1905) and
*Elektra* (1908), *Wozzeck* (1925), *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928), and *Porgy and Bess*
(1935): in their attention to language and narrative, each of these operas radically departs
from both traditional and contemporaneous Italian opera; in their preoccupation with
pushing boundaries of all kinds at all costs—including, for some, high/low-culture
boundaries that challenge the very idea of opera—they radically depart from Wagnerian
opera, too. This list, of course, barely scratches the surface of modernist opera (it is
missing, most conspicuously, the operas of Bartók, Debussy, Janáček, Prokofiev,
Schoenberg, Shostakovich, and Stravinsky). Its purpose, however, is not to be
exhaustive, nor is it meant to be representative of, or a judgment on, the “best” modernist
operas, but to spotlight the variety of ways that opera was radicalized in the first part of
the twentieth century. For this reason, I have chosen operas on the basis of both their
popularity—I am interested in operas that were widely known and discussed outside of
the musical elite—and their ability to speak to different aspects of modernism as it was
performed in the opera house.
Modernist opera begins with Strauss, and not only because of the controversy he courted by using a German translation of Oscar Wilde’s risky and much-censored play, *Salomé*, for the libretto to his 1905 one-act masterpiece. From the first moment, when, deprived of an overture, the audience is thrust into the unromantic dysfunctional world of Herod’s vulgar court, it is clear that “we are to witness a deliberately organised performance and not to be abducted on the magic carpet of music for a few hours in an unreal world that exists in its own right” (Krenek 105). Though Strauss continued the passion of the Wagnerian style and extended, rather than changed, Wagner’s musical technique, what his music expresses constitutes a radical departure from Wagnerian opera. Nowhere perhaps is the distance that Strauss traveled better realized than in the comparison Richard Taruskin draws between “the spiritual sublimation of Isolde’s sex drive and the kinky gratification of Salome’s” (48). In *Salome*, Strauss uses the “narcotic” effect of the Wagnerian sound against his audience: the beauty of music asks us to emote, but the depravity of “Salome’s perverted *Liebestod*” forces us to revolt (Taruskin 44). With the Hugo von Hofmannsthal collaboration, *Elektra*, the Wagnerian tie is almost completely severed, making it clear that this new kind of opera, characterized by disturbing plots, serious literary librettos, and resolutely “modern” music, is here to stay—as Taruskin notes, in *Elektra*, the “harmonic mixtures are more the rule than the climactic exception” (48).

Of course, Strauss’s carving out of new musical territory in these operas is often perceived with irony given the conservatism of his works after *Elektra*. As I shall discuss in chapter three, however, there is another way of looking at Strauss’s perceived turn away from modernism. Taruskin rightly notes that “by the mid-twentieth century stylistic
conservatism was as conscious a stance, and as deliberate a choice, as stylistic radicalism” (49). But it is not just Strauss’s conservatism that sets him apart from his main modernist rivals, Schoenberg and Stravinsky (the latter was, eventually, the leading proponent of neoclassicism). It is, as Charles Youmans points out, his rejection of the sacralization of music. Taken as a whole, Strauss’s musical career reflects an essentially operatic stance—one that embraces artistic incursions and celebrates music’s value as entertainment. In this respect, Strauss, a man who reportedly actually enjoyed being confused with the waltz king Johann Strauss, challenged perhaps the last tenet of Western classical music not disrupted by even the most radical of musical innovations in the early twentieth century—music’s supposed “transcendence.”

Alban Berg’s expressionist opera Wozzeck, premiering almost two decades after Elektra, owes a different debt to Wagnerian opera, namely, the dramatic realization of its unashamedly theatrical impetus by way of rigorously controlled musical form. “Apart from the wish to compose good music,” writes Berg about the genesis of Wozzeck, “there was in my mind . . . nothing else . . . but the wish to give to the theatre something theatrical, and to fashion music conscious at every moment of its obligation to serve the drama” (“The ‘Problem of Opera’,” in Albright 125). But though the impetus for the music is dramatic, the music itself is by no means mere accompaniment. Wozzeck is notable for its eschewal of traditional operatic forms (arias, duets, etc.) in favor of

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19 Writes Strauss’s biographer Norman Del Mar: “the widespread popularity of the Rosenkavalier waltzes caused Strauss to be confused in many people’s minds with the great Viennese waltz kings in a way which could only be considered as gratifying. I have myself heard two elderly ladies asking each other during a concert of his own works given in London by Strauss: ‘Now which is this, the father or the son?’ Strauss’s pride in this confusion with the masters of popular music was perhaps not entirely consistent with his erstwhile role as the greatest and most shockingly modern composer of the contemporary musical scene” (420).
instrumental forms (suite, rhapsody, march, passacaglia, rondo). Though, as Berg noted, in performance, these musical forms are not likely to be heard as such, the technique does have the effect of justifying the work’s “impure” operatic characteristics through “absolute” musical forms. As Adorno describes the complex effect:

Wozzeck fulfills Wagner’s demand that the orchestra follow the drama’s every last ramification and thus become a symphony, and in so doing finally eliminates the illusion of formlessness in music drama. The second act is quite literally a symphony, with all the tension and all the closure of that form, and at the same time at every moment so completely an opera that the unaware listener would never even think of a symphony. (Master of the Smallest Link 87)

Though Berg denied that he attempted to “reform the art form of opera by composing Wozzeck” (qtd. in Albright 124), the influence of this opera can hardly be overstated. As with Strauss’s modernist operas, the main difference separating Wozzeck from Wagnerian opera, aside from Berg’s modified use of Schoenbergian twelve-tone technique, is the choice of non-elevated subject matter. But unlike Salome and Elektra, Wozzeck is not modern for its shock value per se, but for its politics, as Berg gives (Wagnerian) voice to the downtrodden masses of the opera’s haunting refrain: “Poor folk like us” [Wir arme Leut] (29).

Whereas Wozzeck, Salome, and Elektra can thus be seen in some ways as an extension of Wagner, Brecht and Weill’s Die Dreigroschenoper, with its insistence on amateur voices, inclusion of popular cabaret tunes, and decidedly unromantic plot, is a
direct attack on Wagnerian opera. For Weill, *Wozzeck* was the “grandiose conclusion” of Wagnerian opera; “new opera” needed to find its model in a strain detached from the Wagnerian “orbit” (“Appendix II: Annotated Translations” 465, 464).

Brecht and Weill’s operas question the idea of opera in order to effect a political commentary on the very people who traditionally compose an operatic audience. Therefore, though Weill’s and Berg’s music could hardly be more different, it is their relationship with their respective audiences, as Taruskin correctly points out, that really separates a work like *Wozzeck* from a work like *Die Dreigroschenoper*: “where *Wozzeck* adopted a conventional attitude of pity toward its subject, allowed its audience a satisfying (or self-satisfying) catharsis . . . *Die Dreigroschenoper* maintains a tone of unmitigated anger and sarcasm, challenging its audience’s presumption of moral superiority and indicting its complacency” (536-7). The renewed focus on the audience, and specifically, *opera*’s audience, is a particularly important factor in my analyses of Pound’s, Stein’s and especially, Woolf’s recourse to opera.

As I will note in my discussion of the Brechtian elements of the pageant at the heart of *Between the Acts*, given Brecht and Weill’s aims, the very popularity of *Die Dreigroschenoper* seems to indicate its failure as Epic Opera. This is certainly how Brecht viewed the opera’s “mistaken” success. But Weill’s perspective was rather different, perhaps quite naturally, since it was undoubtedly his music that accounted for the opera’s success. In “Shifts in Musical Composition” (1927), Weill asserts:

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20 In chapter seven of *Opera in History: From Monteverdi to Cage*, Lindenberger makes a similar observation in his tracing of the genealogy of Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*, which he links to Wagner by way of Berg’s *Wozzeck* and Strauss’s *Salome* and *Elektra*, and Weill and Brecht’s *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, the operatic genealogy of which begins rather with Mozart and moves through Bizet, Stravinsky, and Busoni (191-239, especially 210-11).
A clear separation is reaching its completion between those musicians who, filled with disdain for the audience, continue to work toward the solution of aesthetic problems as if behind closed doors and those who take up an association with any audience whatsoever, who classify their creations in some larger movement because they realize that, beyond the artistic, there is a general human consciousness that springs from a social feeling of some kind and that this must determine the formation of an art work. (“Appendix II: Annotated Translations” 478)

Weill is surely referring to Schoenberg in the first sentence, yet the statement also gestures toward a subtle difference between the composer and the librettist of Die Dreigroschenoper. Unlike Brecht, who seemed to view opera as a necessary evil, Weill’s many essays addressing the future of opera show he was deeply committed to the operatic genre, and, like Berg, sought to reconcile the seriousness of “absolute music” with the dramatic impetus required of opera. “We cannot,” notes Weill in an essay titled “Commitment to Opera,” “write operas and at the same time lament the shortcomings of this genre” (“Appendix II: Annotated Translations” 458).

At first sight, then, the difference between Weill and George Gershwin would not seem to be so great: both composers synthesized jazz and art music, and both composers wrote for the popular stage (Weill eventually writing Broadway musicals), challenging the idea of “opera” and working to collapse the distinction between high and low culture that, especially in America, had rendered opera the sacralized genre it still remains today (see Levine 94-108). The difference is not even located so much in the respective politics of the two operatic teams. Because of the racial stereotypes perpetuated in Porgy and
Bess, the opera is rarely thought of in terms of its progressive politics, but as Anthony Arblaster reminds us, the political radicalism of Strike up the Band, Of Thee I Sing, and Let ‘Em Eat Cake is present also in Porgy and Bess (291). This is not to say that the overt Marxist politics of Die Dreigroschenoper are repeated in even the most political of the Gershwins’ works, but that the main difference between the operas of Brecht and Weill and those of George and Ira Gershwin is located elsewhere. In Porgy and Bess, George Gershwin wanted to “create an authentically American opera” (Arblaster 290). Thus, unlike the Brecht and Weill collaborations, Porgy and Bess is not didactic in motive, but democratic—an opera of the people, by the people, for the people. Ironically, of course, from the perspective of a black composer like William Grant Still, whose own opera, Troubled Island (1939, libretto by Langston Hughes), takes up the black struggle for independence in Haiti, Gershwin’s appropriation of black culture in Porgy and Bess is inauthentic to the core (see Canton 57-60). This is not the place to deal with the complex issues of race and authenticity in Porgy and Bess, but it is an important context for Four Saints in Three Acts, which premiered with an all-black cast just one year earlier than Porgy and Bess.

George Gershwin may have attempted to deflect the seriousness of Porgy and Bess by referring to it as a combination of the popular (and populist) operas Carmen and Meistersinger (qtd. in Arblaster 291), but it is nevertheless true that like the other modern operas I briefly discuss here, it participates in the trajectory from moving people to making people think, which for Albright distinguishes twentieth-century music from its romantic predecessors (Modernism and Music 5), and for Krenek, distinguishes “present-day opera” from romantic opera: “the great changes in musical and dramatic attitudes
have made it possible for present-day opera to include in its orbit important and intellectually difficult matter, without merely picking out some picturesque trait or other to represent it, as Romantic opera had thought to be the only possibility” (109). Sounded throughout the succeeding chapters, albeit in different authorial keys, are four themes related to this distinction between moving people and making people think which are repeatedly taken up at various points in the operatically focused work of the authors I discuss: the complex signification of opera’s scripted music; the possibilities afforded by (and limitations of) the physical singing voice; the “perpetually present” temporality that opera’s musical and dramatic dimension creates; and the unique social text contributed by opera’s audiences.

**Developing Theme: Music**

In opera, music, specifically the orchestra, is said to express the characters’ emotions—to fill in where the libretto is silent. Aside from the narrating and descriptive capacity this function would ascribe to music, which I shall problematize below, this idea of the orchestra’s truth-telling role in opera is tricky, given the age-old debate as to whether music has the power to express anything other than itself—that is, whether music has non-musicological “meaning.” The plethora of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of music and opera in the still-burgeoning but no longer “new” field of New Musicology, particularly Lawrence Kramer’s body of work, has helped to put the debate over whether music means or not to rest, but for the modernists, it was a hotly contested issue, with typically the position that music has no semantic meaning winning out.21

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21 For a summary of this movement and the work of New Musicology in general, see Kramer’s introduction to *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (1-9).
Paul Hindemith’s Norton lectures, he maintained that music only “means” insofar as it “instigate[s] us to supply memories out of our mental storage rooms” (40), claiming that the “reactions music evokes are not feelings, but they are the images, memories of feelings” (38). His point—to show how the idiosyncratic response to music deprives it of any meaning in the linguistic sense—could probably not be argued, but that which he fails to take seriously is precisely that which the field of New Musicology takes as its starting place: music’s cultural associations—the shared “memories of feelings” that become codified in a given culture’s musical traditions. As Albright points out, the logic of surrealist music, which aspires to “mean wrong” depends upon music’s ability to mean (Modernism and Music 312).

For modernists, no work was as influential in this debate as Schopenhauer’s Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung (The World as Will and Idea), in which music is privileged for its inability to represent anything other than itself: “music, as the only non-representational art, speaks directly of the noumenal (as opposed to the phenomenal) world” (Samson). Joyce, for instance, famously recapitulates Schopenhauer’s view on music in his description of the central epiphany of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, when Stephen at last recognizes his true artistic vocation:

He heard a confused music within him as of memories and names which he was almost conscious of but could not capture even for an instant; then the music seemed to recede, to recede, to recede: and from each receding trail of nebulous

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22 Stravinsky makes a similar point in his 1936 autobiography: “music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all . . . . If . . . music appears to express something, this is only an illusion and not a reality. It is simply an additional attribute which, by tacit and inveterate agreement, we have lent it, thrust upon it, as a label, a convention—in short, an aspect unconsciously or by force of habit, we have come to confuse with its essential being” (53-4).
music there fell always one longdrawn calling note, piercing like a star the dusk of silence. Again! Again! Again! A voice from beyond the world was calling.

(429)

The “nebulous music” speaks truth to Stephen because it comes from a place beyond signification, beyond the world of language. It occupies the space “beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action” where “there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action,” as Eliot describes the feelings music regularly engenders and dramatic poetry achieves “at its moments of greatest intensity” (Selected Prose 145-6).

For other thinkers in the modernist period, music, or what the narrator in Aldous Huxley’s Point Counter Point (1928) at one point calls “an orgy of mathematical merry-making” (41), is an art form that means everything precisely because it “means” nothing. Explaining music’s “essence” in this way, composer Carl Nielsen waxes lyrical:

I am everywhere and nowhere; I skim the wave and the tops of forests; I sit in the throat of the savage and the foot of the negro, and sleep in the stone and the sounding metal. None can grasp me, all can apprehend me; I live tenfold more intensely than any living thing, and die a thousandfold deeper. I love the vast surface of silence, and it is my chief delight to break it. I know no sorrow or joy, no pleasure or pain; but I can rejoice, weep, laugh, and lament all at once and everlastingly. (40)
Indeed, this is Spandrell’s lesson at the end of *Point Counter Point*, when he becomes entranced by the third movement of Beethoven’s Op. 132 string quartet in A-minor (1825), which is subtitled *heilige Dankesang eines genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart* (“Holy song of thanks, from a convalescent, to the Godhead, in the Lydian mode”). The disillusioned Spandrell thinks that the music is “a proof” of a higher power, but when the confirming opinion he seeks finds the music merely beautiful, he is faced with the reality that even if, as Huxley later writes in “The Rest is Silence” (1934), “after silence that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music” (*Music at Night* 19), the inexpressible that music “expresses” is always individual. As we shall see, while Pound’s use of opera as a means to translate poetry presupposes a romantic conception of music as an agent of linguistic transcendence, Stein and Woolf do not limit opera’s musical text as something either to be lauded or dismissed for what Barthes calls its “shimmering of signifiers” (*Responsibility of Forms* 259), privileging music instead as a site of endless interpretive mistakes and possibilities, which open up, rather than transcend or contain, literary content.

**Developing Theme: Voice**

“She sang beyond the genius of the sea” (Stevens 105). The arresting musical sound-image that opens Wallace Stevens’s “The Idea of Order at Key West” (1936) is a trope frequently repeated in his poetry to signify the presence, in music, of something beyond its sound. What interests me here, however, is not just the representation of music, but specifically, the representation of the singing *voice*, for in this poem, the voice is a metaphor for nothing less than the essence of poetic genesis itself—for the “Poetry / Exceeding music” toward which the speaker-bard of *The Blue Guitar* (1937) continually
strives (136-7). To be sure, Stevens’s metaphor is drawing on the long-standing trope of poet as singer usefully outlined in James Anderson Winn’s *Unsuspected Eloquence: A History of the Relations Between Poetry and Music*; it is this trope that guides also Pound’s poetic practice, particularly his obsession with the Troubadour poets. Still, as Barbara Holmes puts it, “[i]t is the fully human singer, finally—not the wind, not the bird—whose art approximates the answer that will distinguish Stevens from his predecessors” (61). Clearly, for Stevens, there is an ineffable, inimitable, almost inexpressible thing that happens when the human voice is conjoined to music and words in song.

As we will see, poets like Stevens and Pound are by no means the lone modernists inspired by the ineffable power of the human singing voice. Take, for instance, the following descriptions of voices in three completely different modernist texts.

Her voice, strong and clear in tone, attacked with great spirit the runs which embellish the air and though she sang very rapidly she did not miss even the smallest of the grace notes. To follow the voice, without looking at the singer’s face, was to feel and share the excitement of swift and secure flight. (James Joyce, “The Dead,” 1914; 193)

23 Though I am interested here in the representation of the voice specifically, I would hasten to add that music, conceived much more broadly, greatly influenced Wallace Stevens’s general poetic practice. Though Stevens was not a musician himself, he was an avid music-lover (married to and brought up by pianists), who subscribed to *Musical Quarterly* (Holmes 23), frequently attended musical and operatic concerts, regularly listened to Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts, and had a classical music phonograph collection astonishing in both its size and stylistic breadth (Stegman). As many critics have observed, Stevens consistently returns to music throughout the body of his poetry, often as a governing metaphor for the act of poetic composition itself—for the process that “gives / Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses” (219), as he explains it in “Of Modern Poetry” (1942). In “Peter Quince at the Clavier” (1923), the speaker concludes: “Music is feeling, then, not sound” (72). Indeed, John Hollander remarks that it is not enough to say that music is metaphorical in Stevens’s poetry, noting that his poetry “is suffused with systematic sound” (133); Frank Doggett calls music Stevens’s “most pervasive figure” (189); and Joan Richardson goes so far as to call *The Collected Poems* an “elaborately conceived opera” (101).
Daisy began to sing with the music in a husky, rhythmic whisper, bringing out a meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again. When the melody rose her voice broke up sweetly, following it, in a way contralto voices have, and each change tipped out a little of her warm human magic upon the air. (F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 1925; 104)

He strode the pulpit up and down in what was actually a very rhythmic dance, and he brought into play the full gamut of his wonderful voice, a voice—what shall I say?—not of an organ or a trumpet, but rather of a trombone, the instrument possessing above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice—and with greater amplitude. He intoned, he moaned, he pleaded—he blared, he crashed, he thundered (James Weldon Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, 1927; 6-7)

Though Stevens, Joyce, Fitzgerald, and Johnson each have a different purpose behind their respective descriptions, and though the characterizations of the voices are different in every case, one thing is the same throughout: the representation of even the amateur human singing voice as something that has the capacity to transcend—be it prose, age, irony, gravity, description, reason, or transience itself.

In the first passage, Julia Morkan’s physical voice signifies something beyond the music it expresses or the words it enunciates. In spite of the fact that Julia Morkan will, as Gabriel later remarks, “soon be a shade with the shade of Patrick Morkan and his horse” (222), her voice, “strong and clear in tone” signifies a youthfulness and vitality
that counters the irony of an aged spinster singing a song that includes the lyrics, “Arrayed for the bridal, in beauty behold her,” and “May life to her prove full of sunshine and love, / full of love, yes! yes! yes!” (Bowen, Musical Allusions 19). Indeed, not only does her voice transcend this irony, in its evocation of “swift and secure flight,” it also transcends gravity. Though Daisy is by no means the trained singer that Julia is, her voice similarly signifies something beyond the music, beyond the words, beyond even the timbre or tone of her voice. Nick cannot explain “the inexhaustible charm that [rises] and [falls] in [her voice], the jingle of it, the cymbal’s song of it”; and though Gatsby can and does, his explanation—“Her voice is full of money” (115)—suggests that even when the undeniable signifying power of the human voice is satisfactorily articulated, it still defies reason. (How can a voice be full of money?) Though the voice of the “old-time Negro preacher” (2) in God’s Trombones is not, strictly speaking, a singing voice (it rather “intones”), it similarly defies rational explanation. In equating the remembered voices of his preachers to “trombones,” Johnson suggests the musicality of a singing voice and the unnaturalness of a manmade instrument, even as his further qualification of these trombones as God’s paradoxically suggests that these “human voices” are beyond human—spiritual, unworldly, unknowable.

In their attempts to explain, with language, how the sound and experience of the singing voice multifariously signifies, all of these authors face the dilemma Roland Barthes outlines in “The Grain of the Voice”: how can language interpret music’s semiotic system without resorting to “the predicable or the ineffable” (268). Barthes solves this problem, in part, by naming (rather than describing) a signifier—“the grain of the voice”—in order to theorize why he derives pleasure from certain voices when they
are “in a double posture, a double production: of language and music,” and not others (269). Particularly useful is his distinction, borrowed and transposed from the theories of Julia Kristeva, between pheno-song and geno-song. The pheno-song consists of the taught elements of vocal production—style, expressivity, idiolect, etc.; as Barthes goes on to describe, using the example of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, it is possible to be perfect on the level of pheno-song, but still have no grain. The geno-song, on the other hand, “is that culmination (or depth) of production where melody actually works on language—not what it says but the voluptuous pleasure of its signifier sounds”; it is here, in “the diction of language,” where, for Barthes, the grain of the voice signifies (271).

Barthes limits the concept of the grain of the voice “to a portion of vocal music (art song, lied, or mélodie), a specific space (genre) in which a language encounters a voice,” and specifically excludes opera from his formulation—“for opera, the entire voice shifts to dramatic expressivity: a voice in which the grain signifies little” (269).

Nevertheless, I think it is productive to extend his conception of the grain of the voice to talk about instances in modernist operas and texts where the voice that encounters a language is fetishized (for its sound, its diction; not its “expressivity”) as a signifier capable of somehow transcending the limits of linguistic meaning—of superimposing a (sometimes contradictory) text on the words themselves.24 While I do agree with Barthes that, in traditional opera, “the grain signifies little,” I would contend that in the literary operas of Pound and Stein (and Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande would also fit into this category), where melody and language work equally on each other and language is not

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24 Barthes describes the grain of the voice in French mélodie as “the sung writing of the language”: “The song must speak, or better still, must write, for what is produced on the level of geno-song is ultimately writing” (273–4).
subsumed by vocal “expressivity,” grain, as Barthes describes it, becomes an increasingly important signifier. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that this is one of the defining characteristics of certain modernist operas.

Barthes’s concept, particularly his distinction between pheno- and geno-song, helps to theorize the signifying that the grain of the voice affords—what he calls “the friction between music and something else, which is the language (and not the message at all)” (273, italics in original). But in the case of operatic heroines like Salome and Elektra, and singing characters like the unnamed soprano who resonates in Rhoda’s ears in The Waves, the grain of the voice is not the only site of trans-linguistic signification, because the singing voice is always a gendered voice, and it is here that the thrill of the vocal sound—something separate from its grain—enters the equation. In Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge, Kramer notes: “Music, like woman, is the bearer of a lack that both threatens and articulates the identity of the normative masculine subject” (52, italics in original). The “lack” that Kramer identifies in music is analogous to the contradiction inherent in the grain of the voice, a contradiction that Barthes, echoing Stevens’s figurative representation of the singing voice in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” suggests might be the true value of music: to be a metaphor for that which limitlessly signifies precisely by not being able to signify at all (285). Viewed this way, it is perhaps unsurprising that the power of the combined “lacks” in female music is “symbolically castrating for the normatively masculine subject” (Kramer, Classical Music 55), which in turn might account for the “undoing of women” that Catherine Clément passionately argues is a defining characteristic of opera. But though an inordinate number of opera’s plots (including the plots of many modernist operas) do
seem to undo women, it must be remembered that, as Carolyn Abbate argues about *Salome* in “Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women,” the realm to which women, as singers, belong is “beyond narrative plot”: “aurally, [the female singer] is resonant; her musical speech drowns out everything in range, and we sit as passive objects, battered by that voice” (254). The female singer “slips into the ‘male/active/subject’ position,” even as her character is objectified by the narrative her voice serves (Abbate, “Opera; or, the Envoicing” 245).

In chapter one we will see how Pound attempts to limit the significance of the operatic voice in favor of the grain of the voice. Given Pound’s use of opera as a means to translate texts, this move is unsurprising, since the realm of signification for the “voice-object,” the term Abbate uses to describe the sound of the singing voice, is less dependent upon—indeed, often divorced from entirely—the text: “[t]he sound of the singing voice becomes . . . a ‘voice-object’ and the sole center for the listener’s attention. That attention is thus drawn away from words, plot, character, and even from music as it resides in the orchestra, or music as formal gestures, as abstract shape” (*Unsung Voices* 10). As we will see in chapter two, however, the playful possibilities of language physicalized through voice is a prime motivation behind the operatic imperative in Stein’s theatrical works. For Stein, en-voiced language, a potent combination of the semantic plenitude of the grain of the voice and the physical power of the voice-object, offers an alternative to patriarchal poetics of authority.

In chapters three and four, the voice-object is problematized differently, as Woolf’s narratives gesture toward the unheard voices that Abbate takes up as a part of her project in *In Search of Opera*: the representation of music “that, by the very terms of
the fictions proposing it, remains beyond expression” (vii). Though it would seem that in literature all music remains beyond expression because it cannot be “heard,” I would argue that direct musical allusions are heard: what Woolf is doing by deliberately leaving out the musical score (alluded to or actually included, as in Pound’s Canto 75), is different. In The Waves, the singer’s cry that Rhoda hears functions for the novel’s audience as musical ekphrasis. It is right that we cannot hear it because to hear it would lend it the reality that would undo its ineffability. Yet Woolf complicates this moment further, for in the end, the voice is not the Schopenhauerian voice from beyond; it is just a voice—thrilling, physical, but not transcendent. In Between the Acts, the unheard musical voices are also unseen musical voices. In opera, the disembodied voice, notes Abbate, “conventionally conveys authority, loudness that is not physical” (In Search of Opera xv). But Woolf’s representation of the disembodied voice is further complicated by its transmission through mechanical means, so that to the operatic cliché of disembodied “voices from heaven, from hell, from the wings, from trapdoors and catwalks” (Abbate, In Search of Opera xv) is added the terrifyingly neutral quality, as Barthes describes the de-humanized voice in “Music, Voice, Language” (280), first of the gramophone’s voices and then of La Trobe’s “megaphonic, anonymous” voice (111).

Developing Theme: Time

To follow the logic of Lessing’s argument, the unification of words and music in opera is less discordant than his conclusion, that the arts should remain separate, would seem to suggest. Lessing bases his argument on the idea that the temporal, or nacheinander arts (narrative, drama, music) should be restricted to the representation of events that unfold over time, whereas spatial, or nebeneinander arts (sculpture, painting)
should be restricted to the representation of static images; the one should never attempt
to accomplish the goal of the other. Many artists and thinkers, long before the modernists
burst on the scene, challenged Lessing’s premise—both in the use of collaborative and
hybrid art forms and by pushing the boundaries of their art forms such that they began to
appropriate the tools of other genres (Stein’s cubist poetics is one obvious modernist
example). Narrative and drama are both temporal arts because the events that comprise
their plots unfold over time, as is music, the art form perhaps most strongly associated
with time. Huxley makes this point in *Point Counter Point*, when Illidge, who is
anxiously waiting with Everard’s lifeless body until it is dark enough to take it away, tells
himself: “Two hours are as nothing. The time to listen to the Ninth Symphony and a
couple of posthumous quartets, to fly from London to Paris, to transfer a luncheon from
the stomach to the small intestine, to read *Macbeth*, to die of snake bite or earn one-and-
eight-pence as a charwoman” (397).

Even though Illidge describes reading, not watching, *Macbeth* as a specifically
timed event, his inclusion of *Macbeth* in his list of two-hour activities reminds us that
dramatic performances unfold for both character and audience, in both plot and
performance time. Drama can therefore be said to have a kind of double temporality, the
temporal space of the plot and the temporal space of the audience watching the enactment
of the plot; the discrepancy between these two times is described by Stein as a troubling
“syncopation” (*LA* 93). The drum that begins beating at the rate of a pulse during the
middle of the first scene of Eugene O’Neill’s one-act play, *The Emperor Jones* (1920),
for example, resounds in both plot and performance time, similarly unnerving character,
actor, and audience. Thematically, the gradually accelerating drums serve to count down
the time that the character Jones has left to live, but practically, they also count down the
time left in the performance. In this expressionist work, O’Neill clearly exploits the
sense of double temporality that results in the compression of the plot (which in this case
spans an entire night) into a manageable performance time, for a heightened emotional
effect: there is a communal feeling of relief when the tragedy ends with Jones’ death and,
more importantly, the silencing of the invasive drums.

In non-performative temporal art forms, like the novel or the epic poem, however,
the continual starting and stopping of the narrative, as the reader unfolds the events at his
or her own pace, disrupt the continuous momentum and progression of the work,
deemphasizing the immediacy of its temporality. As Paul Ricoeur demonstrates, Woolf’s
insertion of Big Ben’s hourly chimes in *Mrs. Dalloway* attempts to give the reader a
sense of how the events of Clarissa’s day are spaced out in time, “*to refigure time itself in
our reading*” (105, italics in original), but the effect is always imperfect because the
temporality that Woolf sets up with this device is compromised by the individual process
of reading narrative, as opposed to the communal (and temporally limited) experience of
watching a play. A novel is typically apprehended in discrete chunks of time, often over
an extended period of time. For the reader, the narrative still unfolds over time, but
because this experience is rarely characterized by uninterrupted progress (a reader can
dwell on one part and skim over another, read the ending before the beginning, return to a
previous passage for clarification), the experience loses some of its temporal impetus, as
the unauthorized gaps in the apprehension of the text continually stop, reverse, or
advance, the narrative clock.
Music, on the other hand, is the most temporal of all the arts: in the simplest of terms, it is the succession of notes with time values accompanied by a steady pulse against which a performer literally “counts” time away.\(^{25}\) It is also, like drama, an essentially performative art: though in theory, a score can be read (or played or sung) in bits like a novel or a read play, it only becomes musically real in its complete sounding.\(^{26}\)

But drama’s double temporality of performance and plot time is collapsed in music, because though music may seem at times to tell or enact a story, it does not do so by creating a temporal world separate from its iteration in performance. Helen’s imagined goblins and dancing elephants in Forster’s *Howards End* ascribe a narrative to the Scherzo of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony; they do not describe a narrative (31). In Abbate’s language, music, filtered through Helen’s imagination, is not itself a narrative, but *mimes* a narrative (*Unsung Voices* 27). Though Abbate’s work in *Unsung Voices* has helped to problematize musical narration and suggest ways in which “certain gestures experienced in music constitute a narrating *voice*” (19, italics in original), it is still a basic fact, as Abbate elaborates, that music exists only in the present tense: there is no musical equivalent to the literary past tense (52-56). This “lack”—much like music’s other

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\(^{25}\) The musical term *rubato*, which in practice refers to the stretching or tightening of note values, but which literally means “robbed time,” illustrates how central the idea of time is to music. Joyce attempts a kind of “literary rubato” in *Ulysses*, for example, when he stretches the word lugubrious to become “lugugugubrious” (365). As Perry Meisel notes in *The Myth of the Modern*, this sense of music as “a temporal sequence rather than as a static of synchronic given” is present in Woolf’s characterization of music in *Between the Acts* (58). “The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third” (112). In *Esthetics of Music*, Dahlhaus also makes this point, noting that music is essentially an “energetic” art or, as he notes, in twentieth-century parlance, a “performing art” (11): “Music and all energetic arts work in time, not merely in but also through temporal sequence by means of an artificial temporal exchange of tones” (9).

\(^{26}\) Distinguishing between the process of reading a novel and reading a score, Dahlhaus writes: “With music, on the contrary, silent reading, insofar as it is not to collapse into thin abstraction, always represents an inner hearing, translating signs into sounds. Musical meaning, in contrast to linguistic meaning, is only to a slight extent, if at all, detachable from the sounding phenomenon. To become musically real, a composition needs interpretation in sound” (*Esthetics of Music* 12).
“lacks”—“lends music,” as Abbate notes, “a terrible force to move us by catching us in played-out time” (Unsung Voices 56).

Thus music would seem to be able to close the gap that troubles Stein about the theatre, and further, to fulfill what for Stein was the true function of art: “to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present” (LA 104-5). “Music,” according to Stravinsky, “is the sole domain in which man realizes the present. By the imperfection of his nature, man is doomed to submit to the passage of time—to its categories of past and future—without ever being able to give substance, and therefore stability, to the category of the present” (54). But music in fact has a more complex relation to time. For one, though it can only express itself in the present “tense,” it can and does gesture away from the present (think, for instance, of the nostalgic tunes that keep the characters in Dubliners paralyzed).

Indeed, as Brad Bucknell notes in “Re-Reading Pater: The Musical Aesthetics of Temporality,” Pater’s idealization of music at least partly rests on its complex temporality: on the one hand, music only exists in the synchronic moment of its production (to read a score is not to make music), but on the other hand, in its clear association with time, “music is, either directly or indirectly, joined to history” (607). More problematic still is that the description of music’s temporality in terms only of its horizontal movement in time discounts the simultaneity of its verticality, which exists, as

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27 The endless interpretations of a musical score are tied to this aspect of music’s temporality: no matter how many times a work has been performed, it exists anew every time it is performed. In this respect, Faulkner’s four-voiced narration in The Sound and the Fury mimics music’s performativity. The novel might be compared to four radically different interpretations of the same score, an analogy that is also implied by Stein’s comment in “Portraits and Repetition” about detective fiction: “Anybody can be interested in a story of crime because no matter how often the witnesses tell the same story the insistence is different” (LA 167).
the examples below demonstrate, in sonic space. As Albright notes, “[a] strong theme in the history of music consists of the discovery that counterpoints could be so precisely synchronized and adjusted that the ear could choose to constitute them either horizontally, as independent lines, or vertically, as a succession of chords” (Untwisting 5).

True to his title, in Point Counter Point Huxley attempts to mirror the temporal and spatial qualities of contrapuntal music by structuring his narrative as counterpoint. In a meta-fictional moment, one of the novel’s protagonists, Philip Quarles describes the project in his journal, which he calls “the musicalization of fiction.” Huxley, by way of Quarles, is quick to distinguish his project from the symbolist practice of “subordinating sense to sound” (302). Rather, he imagines a way to translate a musical form, like theme and variations, into a novel:

All you need is sufficiency of characters and parallel, contrapuntal plots. . . . A novelist modulates by reduplicating situations and characters. He shows several people falling in love, or dying, or prating in different ways—dissimilars solving the same problem. Or, vice versa, similar people confronted with dissimilar problems. . . . The novelist can assume a god-like creative privilege and simply elect to consider the events of the story in their various aspects—emotional, scientific, economic, religious, metaphysical, etc. . . . But perhaps this is a too tyrannical imposition of the author’s will. (302)

The caveat with which the diary entry ends demonstrates the essential problem with literary counterpoint (a problem that Joyce also explores in the “Sirens” episode in Ulysses): because it cannot sound the contrapuntal plots at the same time, because the
plots must be heard in succession, one after the other, literary (verbal and narrative) counterpoint cannot recreate the pluralism possible in the contrapuntal temporality of music: one strain of listening—the horizontal—must dominate. On the other hand, the combination of temporal and visual strategies, as worked out in Langston Hughes’ poem, “The Cat and the Saxophone (2 A.M.),” can replicate a kind of simultaneity. In the formally experimental poem, the song lyrics, “EVERYBODY / LOVES MY BABY / BUT MY BABY / LOVES NOBODY / BUT ME,” separated according to the line breaks I have indicated, are inserted in between the lines of the poem proper down the length of the stanza to create a kind of visual counterpoint that allows the reader to “hear” the song while reading the “poem” contained in between (and constituted by) the lyrics. “Tour de force” or no, the poem, as counterpoint, is imperfect, and in fact relies on music (the imagined tune accompanying the song lyrics) to work. The effect is instead operatic, since the poem in essence accompanies itself—an effect we will see Woolf achieve in her use of the pure present in The Waves. Simultaneously sounded voices are, of course, not unheard of in drama, but the effect of this technique when presented without music is invariably cacophony: music is the only art form in which simultaneous voices sound as distinct melodic lines and blend as harmony at the same time to create polyphony, and opera is the only art form in which it is possible for the cacophony of simultaneously sounded language to blend with the polyphony of

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28 During the opening concert of Point Counter Point, the narrator observes the harmony/counterpoint dualism in Bach’s Suite in B minor, only to dismiss the “final and perfected harmony” as noise by translating it into non-musical terms: “In the human fugue there are eighteen hundred million parts. The resultant noise means something perhaps to the statistician, nothing to the artist. It is only by considering one or two parts at a time that the artist can understand anything” (29).

29 Countee Cullen described the poem as a “tour de force” but questioned whether it was in fact a poem in his 1926 review of The Weary Blues for the magazine Opportunity.
simultaneously sounded musical voices. To the combination of “presentness” and simultaneity in music, opera adds the distance implied by language’s narrating capacity and the double temporality of drama’s theatrical capacity. Thus it may seem ironic that Pound looks to opera, this site of competing and layered temporalities, as a way to appropriate for literature the straightforward horizontal temporality of music, and Stein looks to opera as a way to replicate the immediacy of music’s perpetual present and to defeat the double temporality of drama. Yet, as is demonstrated in Kramer’s formulation of music’s accompanying function in opera as a narrative supplement (in the Derridean sense) that destabilizes—even supplants—the supposed completeness of the linguistic text’s narrative, music in opera can have the effect of complicating and collapsing multiple temporal spaces. To borrow Kramer’s example from Wagner’s Ring cycle: “Why bother to follow all that stuff Wotan is saying to Erda when we can just listen to the doom-laden procession of the leitmotifs?” (Classical Music 112).

**Developing Theme: Audience**

The “we” that Kramer invokes in the question above addresses the aspect of opera that, more than anything else, distinguishes it from other performance-based art forms like music or drama—its audience:

The operatic audience still represents a closed group of people who seemingly stand apart from the larger theatrical audience. . . . Opera was established as an aristocratic genre, and everything called the ‘tradition of opera’ emphasizes that basic socially-exclusive nature of this genre. . . . [T]his piece [Die Dreigroschenoper] offered us the opportunity to posit the concept of ‘opera’ as
the theme of a theatrical evening. (Weill, “Appendix II: Annotated Translations” 487)\(^{30}\)

As Weill’s comment illustrates, the distinctive character of the operatic audience cannot be separated from opera’s aesthetic history and is especially significant in terms of its emergence as an important modernist genre. Layered onto its dramatic, literary, and musical texts, opera has historically added an equally important social text, as the title of John Rosselli’s chapter, “Opera as a Social Occasion,” in *The Oxford History of Music* reminds us. The opening scene of Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920), set in the 1890s, is a familiar case in point: Christine Nilsson is singing in *Faust* at the Academy of Music, simultaneously opening the novel, New York’s operatic season, and New York’s social season. As the narrator deftly divides the audience into three sections, in seeming descending order of importance, it becomes clear that, true to the history that Rosselli outlines, the New York opera house at the turn of the century is a social space first, and an artistic space, second:

Conservatives cherished it [the Academy] for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the ‘new people’ whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to; and the sentimental clung to it for its historic associations, and the musical for its excellent acoustics, always so problematic a quality in halls built for the hearing of music. (11)

When the performance is reviewed in the press, the *audience*, not Nilsson, is described as “exceptionally brilliant” (11), and in the novel, the event acquires significance not for its

\(^{30}\) Weill again takes up the character of the operatic audience in “Opera—Where To” (“Appendix II: Annotated Translations” 506-9).
historic resonances or artistic value, but for being the occasion when Newland Archer first sees Countess Elena Olenska. Given the prominence accorded to the audience in this opening scene, it is perhaps unsurprising that Newland Archer also finds his own wedding “like a first night at the Opera” (148), since on both occasions the respective audiences function as superimposed social texts that add important layers of meaning to the event itself.

Reading the experience of opera as a social text reminds us of the inherent performativity of the genre—because opera requires an audience, it is always a shared experience.\(^{31}\) It also reminds us of the distinctly class-based makeup of that audience. Opera is not cheap to produce or to experience, a fact usually reflected in its moneyed audiences, be they the aristocratic audiences that Wharton describes or the bourgeois audiences that Brecht despised.\(^{32}\) The Age of Innocence is one of Ruth Solie’s examples in her investigation of “the social history of opera in the United States” as reflected in late nineteenth-century American novels (186). Her analysis of Wharton’s “opera box” fiction further finesses Wharton’s use of the opera by reminding us that the two New York opera houses of the time carried very different social import: the smaller size of the old Academy was the domain of the old rich; the Metropolitan Opera was built to accommodate the parvenu excluded from the Academy. The Metropolitan is not explicitly mentioned in this opening scene, but the details of the performance allude to it:

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\(^{31}\) I am of course referring to operas that are staged, not audio and/or audiovisual recordings of opera. As my discussion of Pound’s radio operas will explain, such recordings (although not nearly as popular in the modernist period as in ours) complicate the social experience of opera by making opera available to a wider, but dispersed, audience.

\(^{32}\) There are, of course, national differences in the class makeup of operatic audiences. As Rosselli notes, Venice “invented the public opera house to which anyone with the entrance money (several times a labourer’s daily wage) could gain admittance” (307); to this day, the Italian operatic audience is probably more representative of the entire populace than anywhere else in the world.
Nilsson and *Faust* opened the Metropolitan Opera on 22 October 1883 (*MetOpera Database*). In spite of Wagner’s attempt to change the nature of the operatic experience from a social occasion at which an opera was performed to an aesthetic experience shared by a live audience, with his darkened theatre and aisle-free *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth, the distinction between the old Academy with its “excellent acoustics” and the new Metropolitan Opera with its “unprecedented and in fact grotesque complement of boxes,” shows that going to the opera remained, in New York and elsewhere, a marker of social class (Solie 188-9). This is why in *Howards End*, Leonard Bast, who is trying to educate himself out of his social station, is proud to announce to Margaret Schlegel: “When my work permits, I attend the gallery for the Royal Opera” (35). He believes attending opera and the like will allow him to “one day push his head out of the grey waters and see the universe” (47), but his attempt to better himself by way of high culture actually serves to highlight the impossibility of his ever penetrating that world (in spite of his later penetration of one of its inhabitants): “‘This year I have been three times—to *Faust*, *Tosca*, and—’ Was it ‘Tannhouser’ or Tannhoysers’? Better not risk the word” (36).

Opera’s elitism is thus different than the elitism for which modernism is often accused, which is intellectual, rather than social. Take, for instance, the Schlegels’ aunt, Mrs. Munt, who adamantly praises *Pomp and Circumstance* over Beethoven, simply because the former is British and the latter, German, all the while “tap[ping]
surreptitiously when the tunes come” (Forster, Howards End 30); or the music aficionados in Huxley’s Point Counter Point, about which Phillip Quarles warns Spandrell: “don’t . . . pretend, when you hear Mozart, to go into raptures which you don’t feel. If you do, you become one of those idiotic music-snobs one meets at Lady Edward Tantamount’s. Unable to distinguish Bach from Wagner, but mooing with ecstasy as soon as the fiddles strike up” (434). The “exceptionally brilliant” audience in The Age of Innocence, the social-climbing Leonard Bast and the musical nationalist Mrs. Munt in Howards End, the “idiotic music-snobs one meets at Lady Edward Tantamount’s” in Point Counter Point: all of these characters contribute to the social text of the music they hear. Rather than dismissing or decrying this social text, however, as Phillip Quarles does, many modernists attracted to opera were intrigued by the possibility of thrusting their avant-garde ideas on this socially elitist crowd—certainly this was the motivating factor in Brecht’s project. Others, however, took Weill’s approach, outlined in “Shifts in Musical Composition” (1927), and saw in the importance of opera’s social text an opportunity for the audience to contribute to the text, as Woolf does explicitly in Between the Acts, and as the dispersed authority of Stein’s language does, implicitly, in her operas. Pound’s approach is somewhat different: his use of opera as a means to translate poetry, and his use of radio as a means to make these operatic translations accessible, attempt to widen opera’s audience and remove the limiting aspects of its social function.

**Final Notes**

A few final words are required for my audience. To some readers, the musical silences in the succeeding chapters will seem to belie my formulation of opera as an “imperative” in modernist literature, particularly since challenges to the critical bias
registered in Hanslick’s dictum, “opera is first of all music, not drama,” are still met with some resistance (23). But the truth is, the imperative in the operatically focused work of the modernists I discuss—Pound, Stein, and Woolf—is, at the end of the day, always literary, even in Pound’s case. For these modernists, opera offered not a way out of literary form, but a way into a new kind of literary form. Opera and the example of opera becomes the means through which literature is made new: poetry is “translated,” dramatic ideals are realized, and the novel is cannibalized. Yet it may also be that the example of the literary modernists engaging with opera has made opera new, too, lending it (finally) the literary credentials and prestige of its birthright and ushering in the era of Regieopera that dominates the operatic stage today.
Chapter 1
Ezuversity in the Opera “House”: Pound’s Operatic Translations

When Ezra Pound is thought of in terms of radio, typically the first thing to come to mind is the disastrous series of speeches he broadcast out of Rome during the Second World War, the consequences of which are well known: in 1945, the American government charged Pound with treason; because it was determined he was not mentally sound, however, he never stood trial. After spending the next thirteen years at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, D.C., in 1958, he was released from the psychiatric hospital and returned to Italy, where he lived and worked until his death in 1972. But Pound’s initial experience working with radio was—at first glance—radically different from the polemical broadcasts of the 1940s that still cast a shadow on his poetic legacy. His first radio broadcast, which aired 26 October 1931, was not for the “American Hour” program from Rome; nor did it feature his physical voice, but instead, was an adaptation for radio of his 1923 opera, Le Testament (re-titled The Testament of François Villon for the radio version), produced under the auspices of the newly formed Drama and Features department at the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Surely the first thing to be noticed about Pound’s first operatic endeavor is the supreme irony that when Pound takes on opera, he writes the music, but not the words. Perhaps, however, the irony is not so supreme after all, since for Pound, opera was not a dramatic, or even a musical exercise; nor was it a means to combine drama and music in some sort of Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk or brash, George Antheil-like spectacle. Rather, for Pound, opera served a specific literary function: as an alternative form of
translation, specifically, as a means to translate the category of poetic language he termed *melopoeia*. In “How to Read” (1928), Pound famously categorizes poetry into three distinct kinds: *melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia*. Of the three, it is *melopoeia*, “wherein the words are charged, over and above their meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning,” which defies linguistic translation (*LE* 25). Because the poetic force of *phanopoeia* lies in its ability to conjure images, Pound argues that it “can . . . be translated almost, or wholly, intact” (*LE* 25).

While Pound acknowledges that *logopoeia*, “the dance of the intellect among words,” is impossible to translate, he claims it can be paraphrased (*LE* 25). But *melopoeia* “is practically impossible to transfer or translate . . . from one language to another, save perhaps by divine accident, and for half a line at a time” (*LE* 25). To paraphrase it, as in *logopoeia*, or merely to translate its sense, as in *phanopoeia*, would be to ignore its defining feature. Further, though *melopoeia* “can be appreciated by a foreigner with a sensitive ear, even though he be ignorant of the language in which the poem is written,” it is unlikely that many people, as Pound conceded elsewhere, will read a poem in the original for its music and look to a crib for its “sense” (*LE* 25).³⁴ Because *melopoeia* signifies through its musical and formal structure, it requires a completely new, non-literary medium to render apparent “the trend of its meaning” (*LE* 25).

³⁴ In the introduction to *Guido Cavalcanti Rime*, Pound admits: “I have in my translations tried to bring over the qualities of Guido’s rhythm, not line for line, but to embody in the whole of my English some trace of that power which implies the man. The science of the music of words and the knowledge of their magical powers has fallen away since men invoked Mithra by a sequence of pure vowel sounds. That there might be less interposed between the reader and Guido, it was my first intention to print only his poems and an unrhymed gloze. This has not been practicable. I cannot trust the reader to read the Italian for the music after he has read the English for the sense” (*Pound’s Cavalcanti* 19).
Translation, like music, is an artistic pursuit fundamental to Pound’s development as a poet, so it is perhaps not surprising that the two seemingly dissimilar artistic worlds should collide in this way. In “Date Line” (1934), which opens with a list of five of the various forms criticism can take, “Criticism by translation” is number two on the list. Number four, “the most intense form of criticism save . . . Criticism in new composition” is “Criticism via music,” which Pound explains as “the setting of a poet’s words,” for which he gives his first two operas, Le Testament and Cavalcanti, as examples (Make It New 3-4). Accordingly, critics have linked Pound’s musical and translation exercises, arguing that they are two manifestations of what is essentially the same artistic activity.35 Though Pound never calls his operas translations, he makes the connection between the two artistic activities explicit in ABC of Reading (1934). “The grand bogies for young men who want really to learn strophe writing,” writes Pound, “are Catullus and Villon. I personally have been reduced to setting them to music as I cannot translate them” (104-5).36 As the comment indicates, for Pound, setting poetry to music and translating a poem are different manifestations of the same artistic impulse, which

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35 Following Pound’s position in this essay, David Anderson, explaining Pound’s unique approach to the Cavalcanti translations, notes: “Pound was a theorist who insisted that ‘bringing over’ a poem could take many different routes, from new composition in the style of a given period to ‘criticism via music . . .’ and from prose commentary to the poetic juxtaposition of the Cantos” (ix). And referencing the same passage in “Date Line,” Margaret Fisher concludes that “the setting of words to music replaced translation as a means of elucidating the verse” (EP’s Radio Operas 21).

36 Given this comment, it may seem odd that Pound translated Cavalcanti’s verse and set it to music. Pound worked on translations of Cavalcanti’s verse for roughly twenty years before eventually setting it to music in his opera Cavalcanti. In 1912, he published a bilingual edition of translations titled Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti, and from 1927-29 he worked on a project titled “The Complete Works of Guido Cavalcanti,” which was never published, although some of the translations appeared in his 1932 critical edition, Guido Cavalcanti Rime. A comment that Pound makes in a typescript draft for introductory material to the aborted “Complete Works” project, however, seems to indicate that Pound would not have attempted a translation of the Cavalcanti had he used the operatic medium he used for Villon been available to him earlier: “The translations began with ancillary intentions. Rossetti had already made a poetic translation, and my English began with the intention of serving as a gloze. I could not stand my prose interpretations. I did not, in 1910-11, know as much as I now know about music” (Pound’s Cavalcanti 5).
calls to mind the different ways that translation can be understood, both as “the process of turning from one language to another” and “the expression or rendering of something in another medium or form” (“translation,” def. 2a and 2b). Pound is dismissive of music in this passage (he is “reduced” to setting Catullus and Villon); still, setting poetry to music is represented as a substitution for linguistic translation—it is a solution, albeit an imperfect one, to the inadequacy of his linguistic translations. For this reason, I will consider Pound’s two completed operas, *Le Testament* (and its later incarnation as *The Testament of François Villon*) and *Cavalcanti*, as “English” operas, even though their main texts are not in English.

Like so many of Pound’s theories, particularly those relating to music, opera as translation is probably untenable in practice, or at least completely unmeasurable in terms of its effectiveness as translation. Translating lexical meaning by way of musical sound was by no means a radical concept in Pound’s time. But in his operas, Pound was attempting something quite different from the usual mimetic or emotive translation of things or ideas into musical sound, even if, in practice, his attempt was ultimately subject to the same pitfalls of his romantic predecessors and modernist contemporaries.

Considered in the context of Pound’s broad conception of translation and his reverent appreciation for the linguistic limitations of melopoeic language, Pound’s specific approach to the setting of words to music in *Le Testament* and *Cavalcanti* reveals a relentless drive for linguistic precision ironically undermined by his recourse to the decidedly imprecise, even mystical, signifying capacity of music and rhythm—even if we can agree with Pound that because melopoeia is the type of poetry that most closely approximates music, opera’s musical dimension renders apparent the formal properties of
the verse, which in essence translates the work even though it cannot precisely convey
the “sense” of the words. Though the project on the whole valorizes the art it translates
for its unique difficulty, the use of opera and later, radio opera, as the means to translate
this art demonstrates an interest (a pedagogical and patronizing interest, but an interest
nonetheless) in democratizing this difficulty. My use of the word “democratizing” in
connection with an artist of indisputably fascist allegiances is deliberately provocative,
rather than ironic, designed to invite a reconsideration of the high/low, right/left,
elitist/popular binaries upon which much traditional scholarship on modernism rests.

Pound and Translation

As is evident in even a cursory glance at Pound’s translations, from the early
(1911) rendering of the Anglo-Saxon poem, “The Seafarer,” to the late version of
Sophocles’s The Women of Trachis (1954), from the translation of Noh drama from
Fenollosa’s notes (1916) to the re-creation of classical Chinese poetry in Cathay (1915),
Pound rejected the limitations imposed by traditional conceptions of translation,
recognizing both that a translation is always a new work in and of itself and that it
“presents one of many possible critical analyses” of the original (Apter 4). Indeed, as
David Anderson notes in his introduction to Pound’s Cavalcanti, “Pound often avoided
using the verb ‘to translate,’ preferring a calque such as ‘to bring over’ that recalls the
etymology of the conventional term” (ix). Underlying the meaning of the verb “to
translate,” which derives from the verb “to transfer,” is the notion of movement
(“translate, v”). Thus, to translate is not merely to decipher, as the term is commonly
reduced to mean, but to move from one sphere to another, to shift into a new space.
Pound’s translation techniques evolved over the course of his very long poetic life, but as
Hugh Kenner explains, his philosophy remained the same: “the rendering, without deformation, of something, within him or without, which he has clearly apprehended and seized in his mind” (“Introduction” 10). This philosophy, as is immediately clear, echoes Pound’s own poetic technique, with its unrelenting insistence on “precision”; as Kenner continues, “[t]ranslating does not, for [Pound], differ in essence from any other poetic job; as the poet begins by seeing, so the translator by reading; but his reading must be a kind of seeing” (“Introduction” 10).

In addition to this kind of “seeing” of the text, Pound’s translation process also includes a “seeing” of the cultural milieu out of which the text emerged, something Pound refers to as “translation of accompaniment”:

It is conceivable that poetry of a far-off time or place requires a translation not only of word and of spirit, but of ‘accompaniment,’ that is, that the modern audience must in some measure be made aware of the mental content of the older audience, and of what these others drew from certain fashions of thought and speech. (“Introduction” Pound’s Cavalcanti 12)

Images, ideas, symbols, metaphors, verse forms—with time, even the most original poetic device becomes clichéd. To counteract this problem, Pound, rather than focusing only on translating the meaning of the poems he “brought over” to English, also

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37 Pound’s pronouncements on poetic technique are scattered throughout his voluminous critical writings. Here, I am thinking of “The Serious Artist,” where Pound writes, “[t]he touchstone of an art is its precision” (LE 48); variations of this theme are worked out in numerous other essays, and, of course, are central to the Imagist doctrine. See, for instance, the essay, “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,” where Pound asserts: “technique is the means of conveying an exact expression in such a way as to exhilarate” (Selected Prose 33), or “A Retrospect,” where Pound explicitly links the value of precision to the art of Cavalcanti: “In the art of Daniel and Cavalcanti, I have seen that precision which I miss in the Victorians, that explicit rendering, be it of external nature, or of emotion. Their testimony is of the eyewitness, their symptoms are first hand” (LE 11).
attempted to translate the spirit of the poems, to bring over the way in which they
would have been received in their own time. For instance, as Anderson explains, in order
to recover for his twentieth-century English-speaking audience the sense of wonder that
the Cavalcanti poems would have elicited in their initial audience—in the freshness of
their language, the newness of their verse structures—Pound took many liberties,
experimenting with unusual typography, archaic, as opposed to “pseudo-archaic,” diction
(see Apter 1), and oxymoronic word choices (“Introduction” xv-xvii).

This unique approach to the “bringing over” of a poem into English results in
translations that become, as Stuart McDougal writes, “increasingly interpretive and less
literal. [Pound] condenses, deletes, and expands, and the result in each instance is a
highly original work” (5). But that does not mean that the English “equivalent” poem, to
use John Maerhoffer’s phrase (85), is divorced from its parent poem; indeed, the poem,
and in most cases, the poet, is instead incorporated into Pound’s own poetic process in
what Maerhoffer labels “Pound’s assimilative function” (88). Pound felt strongly that his
translations should act as supplements, not substitutions, for the original. Hence his
intense desire for bi-lingual editions of his translations (see Anderson), or his riposte to a
critic who faulted him for his unmusical versification in the 1912 Cavalcanti translations:
“my endeavor was not to display skill in versification . . . . [T]he music is easily
available for anyone who will learn Italian pronunciation. The meaning is more than
once in doubt even after long study. I thought I served my audience best by settling for
the meaning” (qtd. in Anderson xviii). Pound’s response to this particular criticism would
change in his later translations of Cavalcanti and in his operatic translations (see my n34),
but the idea behind his early position—that the original tongue is ideally presented
alongside its English “equivalent”—remained important, especially when he turned to opera as a mode of translation. Writes Pound in discussion of Japanese and Chinese poetry in *Guide to Kulchur*: “We shd. NOT be at the mercy of single translators. We shd. have bilingual editions of this lot and MORE” (147).38

In the context of Pound’s broad conception of translation, opera emerges as a medium uniquely capable of “bringing over” the poetry Pound classified as *melopoeic*. Theoretically, it allows Pound to showcase the music of the poems in their original tongue and, at the same time, present the meanings of the poems by way of opera’s extra-literary functions. It creates an entirely new, original work of art while paying homage to the source text, and it facilitates the notion of “translation of accompaniment”: Pound’s music, which literally accompanies the words, is written in a style that recalls the music of the translated poet’s time. Moreover, if opera as translation is successful, it better fulfills the pedagogical motivation latent in the act of translation, not only because of its potentially wider audience in kind and number, but also because it is translated into the “Esperanto” of all languages: music.

**Radio Opera**

*Le Testament* was not only the work that introduced Pound to the world of operatic composition, but also, in its adaptation as *The Testament of François Villon* for the BBC, the work that initiated his foray into the medium that would later prove so disastrous, politically and personally. Though parts of *Le Testament* were performed at the Salle Pleyel in Paris in 1924 and 1926, the opera was not heard in its complete

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38 This sentiment is echoed in “How to Read”: “before I die I hope to see at least a few of the best Chinese works printed bilingually, in the form that Mori and Ariga prepared certain texts for Fenollosa, a ‘crib’, the picture of each letter accompanied by a full explanation” (*LE* 39).
version until the 1931 BBC broadcast, and it was never fully staged in Pound’s lifetime. The main difference between the staged and radio versions of the opera is the addition of connecting dialogue in the latter; spoken in colloquial English, the dialogue connects, explains, and responds to the thematic material presented in the poetry.

Though the BBC broadcast of The Testament of François Villon was not particularly successful, commercially or artistically, the process of producing an opera for radio so pleased Pound that he immediately began another opera. Cavalcanti (1931-33), which Pound began even before Villon aired, is, as the title suggests, based on Cavalcanti’s poetry, and composed specifically for radio. Letters from the time attest to Pound’s intense interest in finishing this second opera and eventually having it produced; he even

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39 E. A. F. Harding, the BBC producer who worked with Pound on the opera, put the work’s lack of success in perspective in a letter to Dorothy Pound: “[t]here have been a certain number of letters, some of approval, more of illiterate and stupid protest. At the best of times, our work gets very little publicity in the press, and the Election took up most of the space on Monday and Tuesday. There was, however, a very favorable criticism in the ‘Manchester Guardian’ on October 28th – I have sent the cutting to your husband – and also a couple of screams of rage in the ‘Star’ and the ‘Sunday Referee’” (3 November 1931; EPP). In a later letter to Pound, Harding calls the reception “mixed” (see my n42). Pound himself was somewhat disappointed with the performance, particularly with Gustave Ferrari’s Villon, though he did note that Raymonde Collignon, the singer and diseuse who sang the parts of Beauty and Voice from Church, had a voice “worth writing for.” In a letter to Harding dated 27 October 1931, the day of the second broadcast, Pound gives his assessment:

Your Villon [Gustave Ferrari] sang absolutely NOTHING that was written for him. God damned driveling [sic] mess that comes I suspect from liking the watered down duParc, Chausson post Debussy [sic] typical modern french puke.

One did hear his words. I dont say he is to blame. . . .

The Villon was the only member of cast I wd. absolutely throw out. Seneschal [Maisie Seneschal, Heaulmière] cd. do something with six months training under an absolutely pitiless boss. Marquesita [Violetta Marquesita, Villon’s Mother] needs nothing more that someone to give her a good full booted kick in the broad once in each line when the stress comes. She understood her words. Knew what she was saying when she said it. For a first performance I dont on the whole see that much more cd. have been accomplished. Mistake not to cast Maitland [Robert Maitland, Bozo] in the Villon, and to have kept the fiddle that KNOWS the line of the melody. I take it A.B. [Agnes Bedford] had worked mostly with the women and they had the best rhythm (after the Pere Noe). In fact it was very interesting to listen to. The next thing is to get it done RIGHT The god damn bastard who sang Villon has no savagery whatsoever. Vegetarian. Your actors were all right, and the cockney twang in Noe. (EPP)
began a third opera, *Collis O Heliconii* (1932).\(^{40}\) In spite of Pound’s considerable efforts, however, only the *Villon* opera was produced in his lifetime.\(^{41}\) Though Pound began *Cavalcanti* at the behest of E. A. F. Harding, the BBC producer who readied *Villon* for production, Harding, who appeared interested even after the mixed reception of the *Villon* broadcasts, seems to have run into obstacles from “the money men” at the BBC, who were against producing another esoteric Pound “opry.”\(^{42}\) Though only the latter two operas were intended for radio at the outset, all three have a similar structure: Pound gestures toward a dramatic scenario in what Fisher calls the “curatorial act of selecting and ordering poems,” largely from a single poet (*EP’s Radio Operas* 172); he then sets the collection, in its original language, to music of his own composition.\(^{43}\) The result is

\(^{40}\) See especially Pound’s correspondence with the pianist Agnes Bedford (EPP). I will deal here only with the two completed operas, *Le Testament* and *Cavalcanti*. *Collis O Heliconii*, organized similarly to his previous two operas but with settings of poems by Catullus, was begun but set aside, as Pound noted in 1938: “Having done Villon and Cavalcanti (Sordello intervening), there remained ‘Collis O Heliconii’ (half done, and no small technical problem) and the question of presenting that to the public recalls Mr. Cantleman’s Mate (if I mistake not the hat-rack of memory) videlicet: Dear Ma, this war is a fair bugger!” (“Notes on ‘Le Testament’”). For more on this final operatic project, see Fisher’s *The Recovery of Ezra Pound’s Third Opera: ‘Collis O Heliconii,’ Settings of Poems by Catullus and Sappho*.\(^{41}\) *Cavalcanti* received its concert premiere 28 March 1983 with The Arch Ensemble (San Francisco), conducted by Robert Hughes. No complete recording of the opera exists; seven selections (from three different concerts, one of which was the 1983 premiere) are included on *Ego Scriptor Cantilenae: The Music of Ezra Pound*, produced by Charles Amirkhanian and directed by Robert Hughes (Other Minds). Fisher and Hughes’s *Cavalcanti: A Perspective on the Music of Ezra Pound* includes, for the first time in print, a full score (with piano reduction) of the opera, pieced together from manuscripts in the archives at Beinecke and in Olga Rudge’s possession.\(^{42}\) In a 23 March 1932 letter to Pound, Harding asks: “Have you got a libretto of the new opera yet, and, if so, could you send me a copy? What is it about?” (EPP). Later that year, Pound writes to his wife Dorothy: “[Harding] also wants me to have Possum [Eliot] read ’em part of How to Read = & to have me do ‘another OPRY’ ETC.” (12 May 1931; qtd. in Fisher, *EP’s Radio Operas* 3). But a letter in the fall of that year details the difficulty Harding ran into in getting the opera produced:

There is no chance of it being done before Christmas, and I think the Spring of next year will be the time to make for, if, indeed, by then it will be possible to persuade anybody to spend money on presenting a work of art, pur et simple. At the rate things are going politically now, it seems to me unlikely. […] I shall have to go warily about planting the Cavalcanti on the money men. From that angle the Villon met with too mixed a reception for them to welcome your latest with open hands. I shall have to think up a yarn to woo them with, but that should not be hard, and I intend to put it on if I possibly can. (13 September 1932; EPP)

\(^{43}\) The libretto of Pound’s *Le Testament* is composed of 14 poems from François Villon’s *Le Testament*, Villon’s “Frères Humains,” and two poems not by Villon: “Mère au Saveur,” a thirteenth-century verse
opera much in the style of Weil and Brecht’s *Die Dreigroschenoper*: a series of more or less interrelated arias (no recitative) connected by minimal spoken dialogue and very short (2-4 bar) orchestral interludes.⁴⁴

In treating opera as a “translation medium,” Pound makes opera new by adding a clear educative dimension to a genre more typically designed to entertain, both by creating a curriculum of worthy poets forgotten by history—what I regard as an extension of the programs articulated in works like *ABC of Reading* or “How to Read”—and by making the foreign tongues of these poets comprehensible to an imagined linguistically incompetent audience, as Pound explains in the preface to *Cavalcanti*: “As with Villon the poet here continues to follow his intention: that is, to take the world’s greatest poetry out of books, to put it on the air, to bring it to the ear of the people, even when they cannot understand it or cannot understand it all at once. The meaning can be explained but the emotion and beauty cannot be explained” (vi). The educative dimension of the project is further emphasized when the radio becomes his stage, foreshadowing Pound’s later role as ersatz lecturer, disseminating his views across the airwaves, and instructing

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³⁴ In *Untwisting the Serpent*, Albright directly compares Pound’s *Le Testament* to *Die Dreigroschenoper* [*The Threepenny Opera*] in terms of their shared “primal author,” François Villon (139). As Albright notes, some of the songs in *Die Dreigroschenoper* were in fact German translations (though not by Brecht) from Villon’s *Le testament*. Albright’s fascinating reading of Villon as proto-modernist shows, however, how Pound departed from Brecht. In *Die Dreigroschenoper*, Brecht appropriated the poetry of Villon, “the fifteenth-century Parisian scholar, murderer, pimp, carouser, and poet” (139), to evoke the central themes of his “adaptation” of *The Beggars Opera*. In *Le Testament*, Pound “tried to become” Villon, to animate Villon’s complete social world, to use the whole of music history to embody Villon’s persistence in time” (168).
his fellow Americans from a distinctly Poundian version of the academic ivory tower. As Archie Henderson writes: “Pound felt it was necessary to bring this body of poetry [Cavalcanti’s] to a wider and less specialized audience. Pound saw that the radio was a potentially effective means of reaching a mass audience; and music made poetry more understandable for the radio listener” (“Ezra Pound: Composer” 500).

The Testament of François Villon was a historically significant production—and not only because it was the first time that the poet’s musical, or operatic “voice,” as it were, was heard by the general public. Although parts of Le Testament had been performed for a small invited audience soon after it was finished, the opera was not heard in its complete version until the 1931 BBC broadcast. “Mort, j’appelle” and “Je reyne amours,” arias from Le Testament (which Pound completed in 1923), were first performed by the tenor Yves Tinayre (accompanied by Olga Rudge on solo violin) at the Salle Pleyel on 7 July 1924, at what Pound in the formal invitations to the event called “une audition privée de Musique Americaine” (qtd. in Conover 53). Also featuring music by Antheil for piano and violin, the concert garnered some positive press, if only for the illustrious audience present for the occasion. As Sylvia Beach, who was sitting

45 This, however, was not the first time Pound’s music was played in public. An article that appeared in The New York Herald (Paris) on 6 December 1923, titled “Ezra Pound Now Music Composer,” advertises a concert that month in which Pound’s solo violin works will feature; in a 29 June 1924 article for The Paris Times promoting the 1924 Salle Pleyel concert, the “memorable concert last winter” is remembered as “percussive and horizontal minstrelsy”: “Many of the critics liked it, many tore their hair, and one admitted that Miss Olga Rudge promised to develop a pretty virtuosity with her violin, which Mr. Pound calls a fiddle. Altogether there was quite a little state of things among the musical pundits for some time afterward.”

46 This information is available in press clippings related to Pound’s musical concerts located in the Olga Rudge Papers in the Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The clippings are dated (often in handwriting), but it is not always clear from which newspaper they were obtained. One small blurb on the concert, dated 30 June 1926 (Herald is appended in handwriting) and titled “Ezra Pound Music Pleases Audience,” noted: “Music reminiscent of mediaeval troubadours gave a distinguished audience a thrill last night at the Salle Pleyel, where Ezra Pound,
in the front row, commented, “Adrienne Monnier and I were seated with [James] Joyce and his son Giorgio. Joyce had brought Giorgio along in the hope of converting him to modern music, but Pound’s and Antheil’s compositions were hardly the best choice for that purpose” (132). Two years later, on 29 June 1926, Pound again invited a select audience to the Salle Pleyel, this time to hear eight of the opera’s fifteen arias, in a more complete, concert version of the opera. The event again attracted some notable press, and more than a few famous friends and acquaintances—Joyce, who returned with his son; Eliot, who slipped in and out unseen; and Virgil Thomson, who in his autobiography famously noted: “[t]he music was not quite a musician’s music, though it may well be the finest poet’s music since Thomas Campion . . . . Its sound has remained in my memory” (83). Ernest Hemingway, Robert McAlmon, Jane Heap, Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, Kitty Cannell, and Sylvia Beach were also among the some three hundred guests in attendance.

Though the literary elite of Paris, then, had already been exposed to part of Pound’s opera, clearly, there is an important difference between Pound “translating” for the Ezra Pound coterie, most of the members of which had, at one time or another, “attended” a version of what James Laughlin called “Ezuversity” (3), and Pound “translating” for a radio audience. As Fisher writes, “[t]he Pleyel was the kind of venue commonly booked for the premiere of new music, where audiences were small but informed and reputations were secured among critics and colleagues” (EP’s Radio heretofore known principally as a poet of renown, revealed himself as a composer.” Another clipping, titled “Futurist Music Heard in Paris” (The Paris Times 8 July 1924) opens with a similar assessment: “Music as it might have been, had its demonstration and vindication last night before Montparnasse assembled at Montmartre.” The review, though on the whole favorable, does however note one reservation: “One does not know how a whole opera of this sort of thing would go, but certainly the two songs given last night . . . were music in a graceful form and gave an impression of sincerity and pathos. With a pleasant antique flavor, as of Provence, they seemed quite novel, and something may be hoped from Mr. Pound’s theories about the wedding of music to immortal verse.”
Operas 85). The BBC’s audience, on the other hand, was vast, and its intellectual interest and capacity, for the most part, unknown, as a comment made by Harding brilliantly illustrates. In the midst of the somewhat protracted debate at the BBC as to the value of using two languages in the Villon broadcast, Harding wrote to Pound: “[s]et [the listener’s] imagination going, and he’ll then dream the lot. At least, to work here, one has to assume so, even if it is’nt [sic] true” (15 April 1931; EPP). Harding’s last sentence is instructive, since it indicates the enormity of the gap between Pound’s first two invited audiences, the one studded with intellectual celebrities, and the other an audience of unknown, anonymous radio listeners, about which one “must” assume a degree of intelligence, but cannot expect anything—even that the audience will treat any broadcast as something other than background noise.

And yet, as a comment in another letter from Harding to Pound indicates, the breadth of the radio audience was precisely the attractive feature of this new performance “space”:

The alternative is to broadcast it from some ‘klein Kunst’ platform such as the Arts Theatre Club, but I, personally, have too great a respect for your and Villon’s work to be satisfied with such a restricted audience for it; especially as I am certain that, properly presented, it would appeal to a general audience as opposed to one whose reactions are partly conditioned by the desire merely to be in the swim. (6 March 1931; EPP)

Harding’s comment demonstrates the significant distinction between a live audience and a radio audience. While this latter audience has the potential to completely eclipse the former in size, it completely alters what I have called the social text of opera. Though the
audience is potentially larger and representative of a more broadly conceived populace, its members listen to the work from the private sphere of their homes and are thus physically distanced from one another, making the social ramifications of taste less relevant in the reception of a work. Without the socialites of an Edith Wharton audience or the intellectual snobbery of those “conditioned by the desire merely to be in the swim,” the experience of opera becomes in one respect more like the experience of arts more typically received solo, like, for instance, a novel, making this new version of Villon very different from its partial premiere, which would have had written onto it a very distinct and elitist social text, slyly instructing the audience how to read the work. In spite of the strong anti-theatrical tendencies in Le Testament, Harding’s understanding that Pound wanted his operatic “translation” to reach beyond the Ezra Pound coterie and literary elite who populated the audience at Le Testament’s Paris premieres directly challenges the “critical commonplace” that Puchner identifies as one of the factors motivating high modernism’s anti-theatricalism: the notion that “modernist art deliberately cut itself off from all direct engagement with the public sphere and the modes of representation necessitated by it” (9).

The notion of an audience was not extinguished by its invisibility, though its displacement did present challenges to composer and performers alike. Broadcasting Villon from a studio, as opposed to transmitting a live recording of the opera, tested the performers’ ability to connect to an invisible audience, a problem Pound, in a different context, articulated much later, writing in a 1942 typescript article titled “Radio vs. Printing”: “Of course talking onto the mic/ is in some ways puzzling/ can’t tell who hears you. Write a bk/ and you can judge from the sales that you have a few, or more, select
readers/ I mean if it aint the kind of bk/ a man buys to give to Aunt Mary […] I don’t care […] if only one young man hears me/ if so be he start thinkin/” (EPP). Just as there is a difference between “talking onto the mic” and writing a book, there is also a distinct difference between an opera produced in a studio for a live radio audience, as The Testament of François Villon was, and an opera staged for a live audience that is then broadcast over radio, as would be the case in the opera being broadcast from “some klein Kunst platform,” as Harding put it, and which was the case the first time a BBC audience heard opera over the radio. In the latter, both the performers and the radio audience have a live audience to which they can connect—but in the former, there is no gauge for the radio audience of how the work is being (or ought to be) received, no social text to be written and read, no reciprocal energy between performer and audience. As Walter Benjamin, referencing film, famously puts it in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” because the performer’s (thus the character’s) aura cannot be transmitted to the audience through the camera or air waves in the studio-produced work of art, the performer must “operate with his whole living person, yet [forego] his aura,” resulting in a feeling of strangeness, of alienation, between singer or actor, and audience. (1113).

In addition to testing the performers’ ability to read and then respond to an invisible audience, the BBC studio production also tested their ability to respond to one

47 “Perhaps the most dramatic early day [of the BBC] was 8 January 1923, when part of The Magic Flute was transmitted from Covent Garden as the BBC’s first outside broadcast. It was hailed as a ‘great success’, with a reporter in the Daily Express describing eloquently how the music ‘wafted through the foggy air’ from the stage to the armchair. For the Daily News, the choice of The Magic Flute was particularly appropriate for ‘it has as little to do with gross earth as the songs of Ariel’. In the following week, however, there was a surfeit of opera—Hansel and Gretel, I Pagliacci, Siegfried, The Marriage of Figaro, and Faust” (Briggs 41).
another. Without the dramatic interaction between performers that a staged version necessarily provides, the singers had little sense as to how their colleagues were responding to their work. Raymonde Collignon, for instance, sang one of her parts (Voice from Church) “in a compartment called a ‘tin bath’ to add pronounced echo” (Fisher, *EP’s Radio Operas* 121). As she later related to Pound: “[t]he Gantiere [her duet] was difficult – I never knew what the woman who sang with me was going to do next. Everybody thought Marchese [Violetta Marquesita] sang the prayer most beautifully. I dunno, because I was in the tin bath in the basement” (1931; EPP). Just as the audience was required to imagine the visual elements of the opera, the singers were required to imagine the dramatic scenario, including, in cases like this, their dramatic interactions with other characters.

Indeed, in almost every respect, the BBC version of *Le Testament* was an experiment. For the BBC, the project tested radio’s technical limitations and possibilities, since “[t]he transmission, a studio performance from the BBC’s Savoy Hill headquarters on the Thames River, was one of the first electronically enhanced operas to be broadcast in Europe” (Fisher, *EP’s Radio Operas* 2). *Le Testament* was not only Pound’s first operatic endeavor, but also, in its radio premiere, Pound’s first broadcasting endeavor—his first foray into this new medium for disseminating his work. As Harding’s correspondence to Pound regarding the broadcast indicates, Pound had to balance his own creative vision with Harding’s practical suggestions, given the producer’s expertise and Pound’s inexperience with the medium, in order to adapt the work for radio. Indeed, for Pound, the opera itself was an experiment, not only in “scoring” his own musical theories, but also in seeing how these theories worked in
practice—in a performance geared to a general audience, and requiring the authorization of the BBC, a not always sympathetic governing body.

Why Opera?

Though Pound wrote that “criticism via music” meant “definitely the setting of a poet’s words,” it is important to remember that in the examples that he gives of criticism via music, he did not simply set words to music: he set words to music in the form of two complete operas. Opera, as the composer and music critic Virgil Thomson notes (and Pound, the occasional composer and music critic himself well knew), is a great deal more than the setting of words to music: “An opera is not a concert in costume. Neither is it just a play with music laid on. It is dramatic action viewed through poetry and music, animated and controlled by its music, which is continuous. It owes to poetry much of its grandeur, to music all of its pacing” (A Reader 71). Sensing perhaps this inconsistency between what Pound says and what he does, reviewers of performed and recorded revivals of the operas have argued that Le Testament and Cavalcanti are not really operas.48

Undoubtedly, Pound’s operas are odd as operas—their accompaniment is sparse, they seem to lack solid dramatic situations, their melodies are not often suited to

48 In a review of the 1971 Robert Hughes revival of Le Testament, Robert Comomday, writing for the San Francisco Chronicle, claims, “[t]he still-dormant ‘Le Testament de Villon’ [sic] is a curio and not an opera, if one considers the whole tradition. It’s a stage piece in another tradition, the ballad opera, and a muddy one at that.” In a 1973 review of the Arch Ensemble recording of Le Testament for the Chicago Tribune, Joseph McLellan writes: “this composition, called an opera for want of a better term, is always fascinating and often compelling.” Paul Moor, writing for Musical America of the 1983 Arch Ensemble productions of both operas, says: “Forget the term opera: both works emerge as rather static cantatas in the ancient, predominantly single-melody style” (25). In a review of the same concert for the San Francisco Chronicle, Heuwell Tircuit concurs, beginning his piece with a similar complaint—“[t]he two theater pieces, falsely advertised as operas”—and ending by calling Pound’s operatic endeavor “scholastic Dada.” And finally, Pound’s biographer Humphrey Carpenter remarks that Le Testament “scarcely qualifies as ‘opera’, having more affinity to such medieval French folk-song fables as Aucassin et Nicolette” (391).
showcase the voice and, as Carpenter notes, *Le Testament* is in “a very un-operatic language, with its host of short syllables and consonants, and few mellifluous vowels” (388)—but so too are twentieth-century operas like *Wozzeck* and, in spite of its title, *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Indeed, the anti-theatricality that seems to characterize Pound’s operas is, as Lindenerger has argued, a defining feature of twentieth-century operas as different as Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*, Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*, and Messiaen’s *Saint François d’Assise* (“Anti-Theatricality” 58).

Though as Stephen J. Adams argues, the aesthetic of Pound’s operas “is one of song, not of ‘opera’ *per se,*” it is important to remember that the works were nevertheless conceived as opera: “while not uninterested in dramatic values, [Pound] conceived of opera as essentially lyric. . . . Pound hoped to reform the genre of opera as a kind of ritualized theatrical presentation of lyric poetry” (“Pound in the Theatre” 148). On the surface, *Le Testament* and *Cavalcanti* may seem to be glorified song collections, or as Adams puts it, “a string of poems set to music” (“Pound in the Theatre” 148), but if that was what Pound had intended, he could have very easily published them as song collections, as he did when he collaborated with Walter Morse Rummel on a songbook of twelfth-century troubadour poets. Published in 1912, *Hesternaes Rosae: Neuf Chansons*

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49 In a 1924 article for the *Chicago Tribune*, Antheil writes: “To those musicians who have half an eye, it will be quite clear that the technical side of “Le Testament” is hectic, gawky, and from a viewpoint of modern musical technic, really annoying; nevertheless it will be apparent that it is a work of colossal talent; a genial work; a work gaunt and bare, but with a new richness, and an approach that is as new as planets” (“Why a Poet Quit the Muses” 5).

50 It seems that it was *Le Testament*’s anti-theatricality that particularly bothered one reviewer of the Arch Ensemble’s revival of *Le Testament*. Writes *San Francisco Fault* reviewer Howard Bordner:

Now that we have heard the first full performance of Ezra Pound’s opera *Le Testament* in Berkeley it remains a mystery why Robert Hughes, Bay Area composer and assistant conductor of the much respected Oakland Symphony, insisted for thirteen years on producing this tedious piece of non-music. It is easy to understand why Pound’s composition has never been staged. . . . What Pound fails to offer, since he chose the opera form, is the *dramatic gesture*. 
de Troubadours, lists Pound only as the translator of the songs into English, though as Rummel notes in the preface to the collection, Pound also assisted with the musical settings.51

More important for us, here, than the debate as to whether or not Pound’s operas can be called operas if they do not act like operas, are Pound’s own words on the matter. In his correspondence and press promotions for the works, he always refers to both Le Testament and Cavalcanti as operas—or in Pound-speak, “opries”—as do the musicians who assisted him with the scoring of the works (most notably Bedford, Rudge, and Antheil), the musicians who performed both versions of the Villon opera, and Harding, who produced The Testament of François Villon for the BBC. While writing Le Testament, Pound clearly intended it to be staged and received as an opera, and even after it was adapted for the radio, Pound continued to refer to it and its successor, Cavalcanti (which was composed specifically for the radio), as operas. As Adams concedes, though the operas are short and, as he argues, “marked by [Pound’s] experience with the Japanese Noh and with Yeats’s dance plays,” they are still operas: “Pound thought of them as operas, deliberate attempts to reform the genre, and he sought performance of them not only at the Abbey Theatre but at the Paris Opéra and at the Met” (“Pound in the Theatre” 162).

So why opera? Why does Pound choose to “reform” a genre rather than work with a genre already suited to his purpose? Why not set these poets’ words in art songs modeled on German Lieder or even the format of song cycles—the forms perhaps most

51 “The writer with the help of Mr. Ezra Pound, an ardent proclaimer of the artistic side of mediæval poetry, has given these melodies the rhythm and the ligature, the character which, from an artistic point of view, seems the most descriptive of the mediæval spirit” (Rummel).
amenable to the close relation of words and music? More interesting still, what are the musical and literary implications when opera, “reformed” and “made new,” is used as a form of criticism, a substitute for translation, a pedagogical vehicle? Pound’s relationship to opera needs to be considered both in the context of his intense interest in the troubadour tradition of sung poetry and in the context of his relationship to modern music—as critic, sponsor, and eventually, practitioner. When Pound began his experiments with opera, he was attempting, as was relayed to The Paris Times in a 1924 promotional piece for Le Testament, to correct what he saw as the erroneous path that music had taken: “Music has been going pretty much from bad to worse since it got separated from verse, Mr. Pound thinks, sometime soon after the Renaissance” (“Paris to Hear ‘Percussive’ Music Again”). In operatic terms, this would mean reversing the long-debated hierarchy—prima la musica, poi le parole—that placed music above words in opera, a goal suggested by a comment Pound makes years after composing Le Testament: “You can’t make opera by taking a mass of words made to be declaimed from a stage and just shoving the pitch up and down” (Kulchur 367).

Pound’s rough dating of music’s break with verse is perfectly in keeping with his general conviction, well established by this point in his career, that, coincident with the emergence of the age of “usura,” all arts go into decline “sometime soon after the Renaissance,” a point that reminds us of Pound’s politics, to which we will return at the end of this chapter. But it is confusing nonetheless, given that this dating also coincides

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52 As Adams notes, Pound did not find Lieder acceptable, since they subordinated word rhythms to music rhythms: “[w]hen Pound talks about words and music, the words come first” (“Pound in the Theatre” 148). That does not quite explain his decision, however, since he did not find most opera “acceptable” either.

53 Pound met “Major” C. H. Douglas, the founder of Social Credit, in 1918 in the office of A. R. Orage’s New Age, where Pound, a regular contributor to the journal, was first schooled in the many anti-liberal
with the birth of opera, a form that “began with dramatic pastoral poems written expressly to be set to music,” and is characterized by its unification of music and verse (Greenspan 562). The first known operas, *Daphne* and *Euridice* (in two different musical settings), were performed in Florence between 1598 and 1602, at the tail end of the Renaissance. Likely, however, Pound is not actually thinking of opera at all in his comment, but instead, of the rise of idiomatic instrumental music that began in the Baroque era and soon came to supersede vocal music in importance and performance. And if he is referring to opera, it is probably to what he called “the nonclassical opera which prevailed after 1829,” which he found infinitely inferior to the “classicist” opera of Rossini, Mozart, and their predecessors, not the early operas of the Florentine Camerata.

economic theories (Fabian and Guild Socialism, Distributism, Social Credit, etc.) that primed his eventual turn to Italian fascism (Redman 51). Pound called Social Credit “the doorway through which I came to economic curiosity” (qtd. in Redman 122), and indeed in the early twenties, Pound’s absorption of Douglas’s theories, including the belief that usury was the root of all evil (and the accompanying anti-Semitism engendered in large part by the stereotypical equation of Jews and usurers), guided his aesthetic, as well as political, worldview. In “A Letter from London,” a short piece characteristic of this period, Pound enthusiastically advances Douglas’s economic philosophy to Harry Turner, editor of *Much Ado*, noting: “the middle ages had sense enough to dislike usury and we have let it become the basis of our alleged civilization” (2 February 1920; in *Ezra Pound’s Poetry and Prose* 11:4). In a sense, all of Pound’s works and writings from this point on will deal with “usury” in one way or another, but it was not until the thirties, with works like *ABC of Economics* (started in February 1933, a month after he met Mussolini) and *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1933), that Pound’s political writings overtook his literary endeavors and began to take on an increasingly overt anti-Semitic bias (see Redman 101). The poetic culmination of the expression of these ideas, Canto 45 ("With Usura"), was published as a part of *The Fifth Decad of the Cantos* in 1937. As Leon Surette’s extensive investigation into Pound’s deplorable politics reveals, Pound’s “descent into anti-Semitism” was not simply a result of his erroneous but common identification of bankers with Jews, but of his later adoption of a “conspiracy theory,” the details of which go beyond the scope of this chapter (*Pound in Purgatory* 7), though it is interesting, as Tim Redman rather wistfully notes, that the real economic turn in Pound’s work coincides with the composition of *Le Testament* and *Cavalcanti*:

Pound was increasingly serious about the musical direction his work was taking. One can only speculate about what influence a close involvement with music might have had on Pound’s poetry had he felt free to pursue it. As it was, the political and economic crises of the decade intervened, and there is scant further reference of the ‘new movement’ [musical] he foresaw in poetry. (101)

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54 In the Baroque era [c.1600-c.1750], the mainstream of musical development divided. One branch continued the development of vocal music, with concentration on dramatic or quasi-dramatic music, both sacred and secular. The other branch developed idiomatic instrumental music. When emancipated from almost total dependence on vocal forms, instrumental music flourished and by the end of the era it was in a position of dominance” (Stolba 241). See also Henderson, who outlines this history in relation to Pound’s musical taste ("Pound and Music” 43-44).
(Pound, *EP and Music* 441). As Robert Merritt’s book, *Early Music and the Aesthetics of Ezra Pound*, makes clear, Pound’s “assimilation of some of the aesthetic values of the music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries formed one of the important bases of his more general critical convictions” (ix). Indeed, there is a clear affinity between opera as it was initially developed, which “can be seen as a genre that grew out of literary discussion in high society” (Brown, “Opera: Immediate Origins”), specifically, a discussion of how to recreate Greek drama, and opera as Pound conceived of it in *Le Testament* and *Cavalcanti*, which stems from similarly literary concerns and interests—specifically, how to “bring over” ancient poets in ancient languages into a non-linguistic “language” understandable to a contemporary audience.\(^{55}\) This similarity notwithstanding, still, for Pound, it was obviously the troubadour tradition of the poets whose poems composed his libretti, and not the operatic tradition, that provided the aesthetic for *Le Testament* and *Cavalcanti*. Pound’s “purpose with Villon and Cavalcanti,” as Adams suggests, “is to conjure the presence of those histrionic figures through their poems—set to music and performed in a very particular way” (“Pound in the Theatre” 148). Given his long-standing interest in the troubadour poets—his first critical work was *Spirit of Romance*—it is perhaps not surprising that when Pound turned to opera, he would eschew the relatively new tradition of opera in favor of this much older tradition of music accompanying words.

\(^{55}\) This comment is of course alluding to the famed “Florentine Camerata,” whose discussions as to how to recreate ancient Greek drama (which they believed was sung) are traditionally considered to have led to the development of opera. As Henderson comments, “[t]wo well-known sixteenth-century groups, the Florentine Camerata and the French Pléaide, may be seen as among the earliest embodiments of a reactionary tradition that led up to Pound” (“Pound and Music” 44). Carpenter’s comment, that “Ezra claimed he had constructed the libretto on the ‘greek model’” also suggests a connection between Pound and the Florentine Camerata (391).
Though Pound’s intense interest in the troubadours is clearly the impetus for the operas—writes Adams, “[b]y 1908 Pound had firmly built his ideal of word and music on the art of the troubadours” (“Pound in the Theatre” 150)—it would be incorrect to limit Pound’s interest in composing opera to this one area. As is revealed by a remark that Pound makes in the same interview for the *Paris Times* quoted above, he did not view *Le Testament* as a revivalist project in the vein of the work of Arnold Dolmetsch, the musician and instrument maker who helped initiate the twentieth-century revival of Early Music, though Pound certainly approved of Dolmetsch’s project. Rather, Pound placed it in the same category as the most avant-garde compositions of his time: “George [Antheil] is interested in airplanes and I am interested in poetry and we come out at about the same results” (“Paris to Hear ‘Percussive’ Music Again”). Though in his work as “William Atheling,” music critic for the *New Age* (1917-21), Pound admits that he “sympathized with Arnold Dolmetsch’s opinions” and “might very well have thought that music ended with Bach” (*Treatise* 67), in later writings it becomes evident that Pound had a much wider interest in contemporary music than his early reviews would suggest.\(^{56}\)

Disappointingly, Pound seems to have missed out on many of the important modernist musical events in London while he was working as a music critic (see Schafer, *EP and Music* 25, 61). All the same, his knowledge of modern music was certainly not

\(^{56}\) This comment is not meant to indicate that Pound disparaged Dolmetsch’s work—indeed, Pound, like other literary figures, including Shaw, Yeats, and Symons, was profoundly interested in Dolmetsch’s research into early music (see Pound’s several essays on Dolmetsch, all collected in *EP and Music*, 35-50 and Schafer’s commentary in the same volume, 15, 41; see also Merritt 5-6). Moreover, Pound himself was involved in a project similar to Dolmetsch’s recovery of early English music, when, together with Rudge, he instigated the revival of Vivaldi’s music (see Adams, “Pound, Olga Rudge, and the ‘Risveglio Vivaldiano’”). However, I do not see Pound’s operas as participating in this particular kind of venture, though I do think that the projects are related in the pedagogical or educative emphasis that seems to motivate them.
negligible in these years: “[h]e attended the London première of numerous Diaghilev ballets, including Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and Satie’s *Parade*” (Schafer, *EP and Music* 489), and from his reviews, we know that he heard Arthur Rubinstein play Debussy, de Falla, Poulenc, Profokieff, and Ravel (*EP and Music* 234-8). And in later years, his knowledge base with regard to contemporary music opened up considerably. Though later essays show that he was ambivalent about Berg, Schoenberg, and Scriabin, and completely dismissive of Gershwin, he seemed to know about their work well enough to write on them with some sense of authority. In 1928, Pound translated Boris de Schloezer’s *Igor Stravinsky* from the French, a work that, as Henderson points out, 57 As a comment in a letter from Pound to Rudge indicates, Pound heard a great deal of music in these years: “don’t buy a ticket for me unless it is something bloody remarkable=remember I wuz a critik for 3 years=& have had enough concerts to last one for life” (5 November 1923; ORP). Other than the composers and compositions mentioned in the reviews, we do not know exactly what Pound heard; however, we do know that the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham gave Pound free access to all his rehearsals at Covent Garden during Pound’s years as a music critic, and that in 1916, Beecham commissioned Pound to translate the libretto of Massenet’s *Cinderella*, though it was never used (see Fisher and Hughes 68 n188; Schafer, *EP and Music* 25). 58 Pound’s opinions of modern music ranged widely; in general, he preferred what he called “horizontal music” (i.e., rhythmic, melodically driven) to the “vertical music” (harmonically driven) of Wagner, and especially, Debussy. As Pound wrote in “Francesco Vigliani and Others,” a 1918 review for *The New Age*, “[Debussy] succeeded, I do not wish to be paradoxical, in writing music for the eye, with the result—as in a different way with Wagner and the middle XIXth century musicians who wrote for the solar plexus, and as must be with any composer who writes music for anything beside or for anything in addition to the ear—the effect of his music diminishes on repeated hearing” (*EP and Music* 71). He wrote often about Debussy—and though his assessment was ambivalent at best, Schafer writes that “on the whole his attitude to this master was benevolent, obviously the result of his close association with Walter Morse Rummel, who had been a member of Debussy’s intimate circle” (62). For Pound on Scriabin, see his essay, “Anti-Scriabin”: “I think Scriabin belongs among the heretical composers, but he is a most interesting heretic, and I will certainly be part of the small company that will listen to the presentation of Scriabin’s work” (*EP and Music* 334). He heard at least one work of Berg (Lyric Suite), which he thought “sticky and aimless” in contrast to Honegger’s *Four in C*, which he admired (*EP and Music* 415), and was aware of *Wozzeck*, as Bedford urged him to see it in 1928: “Wozzeck of Alban Berg was performed at Queen’s Hall recently—in a small version. I thought it extraordinarily good. If you get a chance of hearing it do go tell me what you think of it. The end is not so good but the 1st act I thought splendid” (9 April; EPP). In a later letter, she again asks Pound’s opinion of Berg: “Glad you approve of Bartok—I think him very good. . . . Do you know anything about Alban Berg?” (17 October 1933; EPP). Antheil also mentions *Wozzeck* in his correspondence with Pound (undated letter; EPP). Pound greatly respected Hindemith, writing of the *Schwanendreher*: “[h]ere the totalitarian ideal, the corporate ideal contemporary with to-day’s musical thought, whoever may ignore it, stands manifest” (*EP and Music* 415), and he wrote enthusiastically about Bartok’s fifth quartet in *Guide to Kulchur*. But he dismisses Gershwin in a vitriolic and anti-Semitic letter to Antheil (8 January 1938; EPP).
would later “influence Pound’s thinking about the social import of music” (“Pound and Music” 15), eventually leading to his creation of “a unique series of concerts which ran intermittently between 1933 and 1939” in Rapallo (Schafer, *EP and Music* 321). The so-called Rapallo concerts, which for Pound “provided a laboratory for the objective . . . examination of music,” as he wrote in “Money Versus Music” (*EP and Music* 379), showcased, among more traditional and early music composers, new works by Bartok, Hindemith, Ravel, Satie, Stravinsky, and even, in 1934, Pound himself (Schafer, *EP and Music* 321). As R. Murray Schafer remarks, “[f]inding new music was . . . a task Pound pursued with alacrity” (*EP and Music* 326). This is not to say that the concerts (or the composers he encountered by way of the concerts) influenced the operas—indeed, Pound organized these concerts after he had written both of his operas—but only to demonstrate that, in spite of Pound’s early comments, his interest in music went far beyond the narrow worlds of Dolmetsch and Rummel, Vivaldi and Dowland.

Moreover, it should be remembered that there is not so great a gap between the ancient music with which Pound publicly sympathized and the modern music of his time, a point made in *The Relation of Ultramodern to Archaic Music* (1921), a short study written by Pound’s close friend, the pianist Katherine Heyman. Though mainly focusing on composers Debussy and Scriabin, the work includes a chapter titled “Parallels

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59 Presumably this performance of “Tos temps serai” and “Ailas!” from *Cavalcanti*, sung by Lonny Mayer, was the only time Pound heard any part of his second opera performed (Schafer, *EP and Music* 363).

60 William Walter Hoffa makes a similar argument with regard to Pound’s poetry in his discussion of Antheil’s influence on the *Cantos*: “Pound’s method in his major poem [the *Cantos*] owes as much to a particularly modernist aesthetic, well delineated elsewhere, as it does to Dantean or Homeric parallels or the Chinese ideograms” (68). Hoffa furthermore makes the point that Pound’s burgeoning interest in contemporary music is mirrored in his poetry: “the progression of Pound’s early poetry was not from ‘unmusical’ to ‘musical’ poetry, but rather from a poetry of an archaic, literary, and medieval ‘music’ . . . to a poetry of natural and modern speech rhythms and flexible contemporary ‘music’” (63).
Between Ultramodern Poetry and Ultramodern Music,” in which Pound is compared to Stravinsky “in quality if not in power or endurance” (104). Indeed, in *Guide to Kulchur*, Pound, like Heyman, similarly links archaic and ultramodern music when he ties Rummel and Dolmetsch together with Antheil as three figures worthy of a writer’s attention:

“Walter Rummel’s brief preface to his edition of troubadour songs, Arnold Dolmetsch’s manner of writing in his *Music of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries* and even Antheil’s incisiveness when not writing for publication might give basis for belief that music is excellent discipline for the writer of prose” (71).

**Pound and Antheil**

This broader perception of Pound’s musical interests helps to explain his relationship to Antheil, the one contemporary composer who *did* profoundly influence the making of the operas. Just as he had acted as an impresario in the literary world, or in Antheil’s words, “a discoverer of genius” (*Bad Boy* 117), famously sponsoring writers like Joyce, Eliot, and Hemingway, Pound also sponsored Antheil, drumming up press for his works, creating performance opportunities for him and Olga Rudge, collaborating on *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony*, and occasionally, supporting him financially.

Much later, Antheil would discount Pound’s influence, help, and musical expertise in his autobiography, claiming:

> from the first day I met him Ezra was never to have even the slightest idea of what I was really after in music. . . . Ezra was in 1923 merely fighting for a stale old moth-eaten cause, the cause of the cubist age; for what he termed “the cold, the icy, the non-romantic, the non-expressive.” But in painting, in poetry, and in music the cause of the cubists, the vorticists, and the abstractionists had already
been thoroughly won; indeed it was already being superseded by the equally cold neo-classicism . . . I still do not know why I permitted Ezra to issue his book [Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony] about myself. (Bad Boy 119-120)

Antheil is, of course, speaking retrospectively, and rather unfairly. Though Pound’s musical theories were not often revelatory—as Rudge, referring to the impossible metrics of Le Testament and the audacious statements in the Treatise on Harmony, admonished in a letter: “people have considered the subject before” (20 October 1924; ORP)—he did anticipate some musical practices, notably Webern’s klangfarbenmelodie technique.61 Moreover, the substantial correspondence between Pound and Antheil belies the claim that Pound “merely wanted to use [Antheil] as a whip with which to lash out at all those who disagreed with him” (Bad Boy 119).62 Undoubtedly, Pound’s relationship with

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61 Following Schafer, Hughes points out that “klangfarbenmelodie occurs nowhere in Antheil’s own work. Since the concept appears in a letter written by Pound in 1921 (‘remembering that the accords, or rather identical note is built up of several instruments forcing one giving VERY different overtones, how much bloody chord-harmony is necessary?’) and since it is unlikely that he had heard Webern’s music, it would seem apparent that Pound has arrived at his orchestration idea independently” (“Ezra Pound’s Opera” 13).

62 Letters Antheil wrote to Pound regarding the Frankfurt première of Antheil’s Opera Transatlantik indicate that, long after their collaboration on the Treatise, Antheil was still looking to Pound to help secure publicity for works, which Pound did, writing articles for the press about the new opera, and convincing a number of sympathetic listeners to support the work by traveling to attend (and applaud) the première (see the 1927-1933 Antheil/Pound correspondence, Ezra Pound Papers Addition). Indeed, by 1927, it was Antheil, not Pound, who was anxious for a continued professional association, as is revealed in a cold letter Pound writes to Antheil from Rapallo that hints of the proposed Joyce/Antheil collaboration:

Dear George

I am not particularly interested in anything you have done since Ballet Mechanique. The third violin sonata is an excellent piece of work, but am not sure it needed you to write it.

I was not aware that I had ever had any influence on your work. I succeeded [sic] in getting or in helping to get some of it performed several years ago but do not consider that that constitutes any obligation on your part. Am not interested in la rue de l Odeon, or in neo’classics, neo-thomists, or even neo-Ulyssism.

The yawps of [the] press are certainly of no importance. Nothing is to be expected of that country, and least of all any sort of comprehension of anything.

Get your stuff printed, and the three dozen people capable of understanding it will eventually discover that it exists.

Yours,

ZP
Antheil was self-serving to an extent (particularly where Antheil’s collaboration with Pound’s companion, the violinist Olga Rudge, was concerned), but it was nonetheless mutually beneficial, and founded on a perceived kinship of musical sensibility.

Indeed, in a 1923-24 letter to Pound, Antheil admits: “My four-hour opera is very much influenced by yours. Same technic [sic]” (undated; EPP), and in 1934, it is Antheil, not Pound, who seeks further collaboration:

Ezra, if you would give me an idea for a stage work (not an opera, although there would be an occasional solo) with your poetry I would set it, and produce it here in New York with the American Ballet. It might not be a bad thing, for Virgil has certainly not done Gertie Stein any harm, and she is top dog now in N.Y.C. since her Alice B. Toklas book and the Stein opera. (26 June 1934; EPP)

Pound’s relationship with Antheil was particularly productive in the sense that it exposed him to both the avant-garde works that Antheil was composing and the modernist musical aesthetic, Stravinsky’s especially, that Antheil emulated. Though Pound was undoubtedly attracted to Antheil’s anti-establishment attitude, it was Antheil’s obsession with rhythm that drew the two together, and nowhere is this sense of rhythm clearer than in *Ballet mécanique*, a work that (in)famously includes propellers, sirens, and, in its original version, 16 synchronized pianolas among its roster of percussive instruments. As

For an extended discussion of the complications surrounding this relationship, see Erin E. Templeton, “‘Dear EzzROAR,’ ‘Dear Antheil’: Ezra Pound, George Antheil, and the Complications of Patronage.”

Pound declined Antheil’s offer, remarking, “[t]he honor of succeeding Erskine as yr/ collaborator is NOT tempting. The main question wd. seem to be whether you have any MUSIC to write. I doubt very much if you COULD in any case set any words to music” (7 July 1934; EPP). In *Guide to Kulchur*, he more publicly dismissed Antheil for his later dubious career choices, writing: “[Antheil] has gone to hell and to Hollywood a ‘sub-Medean talent’, he has made himself a motley and then some” (94).

In “Machine Art” Pound rejects the notion that the point of the *Ballet mécanique* is that it makes “one hell of a row,” insisting, instead, that it is important for its rhythmic advances, specifically, its use of
Pound, praising the work for its rhythmic innovations in a 1926 review for *New Criterion*, remarks, “via Stravinsky and Antheil and possibly one other composer, we are brought to a closer conception of time, to a faster beat, to a closer realisation of, shall we say, ‘decomposition’ of the musical atom” (*EP and Music* 316). When Antheil titled his autobiography *Bad Boy of Music*, he was pointing to a reputation established by this work and its infamous Theatre des Champs Elysées première—an event which quickly became mythologized as the 1920s equivalent of the 1913 première of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*. As was reported in the *Chicago Tribune* of the 19 June 1926 performance, Pound himself had to “remonstrate” with the rioting audience, shouting “‘Silence, imbeciles!’ . . . with the French inflection, although the audience was anything but French” (“George Antheil’s Ballet Stirs Huge Audience to Plaudits and Catcalls”). The spectacle of the premiere aside, the *Ballet mécanique*, though never performed as Antheil originally scored it in his own lifetime, represented the most daring music of its time; Pound’s championing of it and its composer is a clear indication, first, of the poet’s position at the forefront of the contemporary music scene, and second, that in *Le Testament* and *Cavalcanti*, Pound was responding to Antheil and his world—was making opera new—in addition to attempting to recapture the culture of troubadour poetry.

**Opera as Translation: The Score**

Though Pound was a music enthusiast, he was an amateur musician, and so required help scoring his operas; as a result, his first opera, *Le Testament*, exists in rhythmic durations so long that “the NOISE is, as it were, swallowed up by them, or at any rate brought into proportion with something else of corresponding magnitude” (79).

65 For an account of the Paris premiere, where “cheers drowned out the opposition,” see Noel Riley Fitch’s *Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation*: “If Antheil had not ‘had a hearing,’ he had at least, according to Sylvia, had a *chahut* (riot), and from a Dada point of view, one could not have anything better. . . . In terms of scale and volume, the concert was one of the greatest events of the twenties in Paris” (239).
several versions, each inflected with the personal style of the amanuenses who assisted the poet. Pound initially collaborated with pianist Agnes Bedford, but he was never satisfied that the rhythmic values, as he conceived of them, were conveyed accurately by the “hymn tunes bars of equal length” and standard time measures of the score that resulted (Rudge to Pound, October 1924; ORP). In 1923, he had Antheil “edit” the work, which resulted in a much more precise score, but one so difficult that it is unlikely its own composer could actually read it. (The first five measures of the opera are in five different time signatures: 4/4, 11/16, 3/4, 5/8, and 7/8.) Though Pound heavily edited this version for the BBC broadcasts, it is the Antheil score that has been used in most subsequent performances of the work. Given Pound’s musical amateurism, one might assume that Antheil had more than an editorial role in the writing of Le Testament; this assumption, however, is unsubstantiated by a careful examination of the successive drafts, which each reflect the same basic artistic conception.\footnote{Most performances of the opera, including the Arch Ensemble recording, have followed the Antheil version. Both the Bedford and the Antheil scores are in the Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library. A facsimile edition of the Antheil-Pound Le Testament is now available for viewing online through Beinecke’s Digital Images Online. For more on the various editions of Le Testament, see Fisher’s article, “The Music of Ezra Pound” (141-4). Though Antheil scored the opera; he did not compose it. His job was simply to record what Pound dictated, as Bedford had done previously: “I took the whole Villon work down from Ezra’s singing and performances on the piano,” she wrote retrospectively to Dorothy Pound (19 November 1967; qtd. in Fisher and Hughes 20). The process was basically the same with Antheil: “[Pound] beat, dictated, and cantillated the music and words while Antheil [who knew no French] notated the results carefully into what Pound was to call ‘fractional metrics’” (Fisher and Hughes 30). Thus, though it may be “tempting to assume that Antheil wrote Pound’s opera for him,” as Fisher writes, “[t]he handwriting and content of the early music drafts establish that it was Pound, not Antheil or Bedford, who set the groundwork for Villon; Pound’s music criticism and essays anticipate and support that groundwork” (“The Music of Ezra Pound” 152).} 

Quite unlike traditional opera, in Le Testament, the music is not a competing text. As Adams writes, the hierarchy identified by Susanne Langer as the “principle of assimilation,” whereby “music absorbs words,” is in Pound’s operas “defeated only by
reducing music to such a rudimentary condition that the text stands out” (“Pound in the Theatre” 149). Unlike the complexity of extra-musical signification in, for instance, Wagner’s leitmotivic system, Pound’s musical score, in accordance with his theory of music, is determinedly simple, if extraordinarily difficult to execute. The goal of Pound’s operas is to focus the listener on the words—on the beauty of their sound, their diction, and, as we shall see, the “sense” that they convey, too—ultimately, to translate the “emotion and beauty” of the poetry. Because the emphasis is always on the precise enunciation of the word, as Pound uses the music to teach us how to appreciate the diction of the poetry, rhythm supersedes melody, and harmony is reduced to the barest of essentials. Indeed, when Bedford suggested that Pound add counter rhythms that would fall on the beat in the orchestration, so that the voice could sing “against something, rather than instruments constantly doubling it” (no date; EPP), he refuses her advice; the orchestration’s sole purpose is to emphasize the literary text, as Pound makes clear in the foreword to Le Testament: “The ‘orchestration’ in the first part of the opera is not in the usual sense ‘musical.’ It is simply an emphasis on the consonantal & vowel sounds of the words.”

Because every element of the music is directed by the word, by the poetic texts that the music is translating, rhythm and time—the elements common to both poetry and music—are of primary importance. This hierarchy is true not only of the compositions under consideration here, but in all of Pound’s musical compositions and writings on music; indeed, the so-called Treatise on Harmony might more accurately be titled “Treatise on Rhythm” or “Treatise on Time in Music.” It begins with a teacher asking the “élève” what element is missing from all treatises on harmony, to which the “teacher”
pronounces: “The element most grossly omitted from treatises on harmony up to the present, is the element of TIME. The question of the time-interval that must elapse between one sound and another if the two sounds are to produce a consonance or an interesting relation, has been avoided” (9). Accordingly, in the operas, the words dictate the pitches because the words necessarily dictate the rhythm.

*Le Testament* has become famous for the incredibly complex rhythmic notation that Antheil used in his version of the opera. It is a score that, as Fisher notes, is “fiercely difficult to perform,” even for musicians who are accustomed to complex microrhythms (“The Music of Ezra Pound” 139). Undoubtedly, as Rudge argued to Pound in a lengthy letter discussing the opera, there would have been an easier way of notating the rhythm in *Le Testament*, without resorting to the “hymn tunes bars of equal length” of the Bedford version:

If, before criticising singers . . . he would . . . learn himself to sing a simple rhythm from notes . . . he would find out why the notation of the George mss of Op[era] is impossible in use—though it is an exact record of what was done at the time . . . how do you expect a musician to measure—what by? . . . You say Bach’s subtle fractions—exactly so—and George’s in his own stuff—it may look complicated . . . but it is simple enough—there is something to measure it by—You cant [sic] get a normal measure in the mss—It might be quite correct to answer—if someone asked you the length of the room to say so many billion billion millimeters—but it wouldn’t be any help to the person doing something practical like laying carpet . . . If he would stop confusing time length and accents! (October 1924; ORP)
What particularly bothers Rudge is the constant movement between meters with different denominators, which makes finding a steady pulse all but impossible for the performer.\textsuperscript{67} But Antheil, who devised the microrhythms system for Pound, was not really concerned with making the work performable; for him, the whole experience was an experiment in how far one could take the theories that he, together with Pound, expounded in the

*Treatise on Harmony.* He relished the opportunity to put his own stamp on the opera, and that meant proving first that he could precisely transcribe Pound’s intentions, and second, that Pound’s rhythms were, like those of his own compositions, really so “new” so as to warrant this previously unheard-of difficulty.\textsuperscript{68} Pound, on the other hand, was at this point too amateur a musician to understand how difficult his opera would be to perform in this version or to conceive of an alternative to Antheil’s method.

Bucknell makes the point that though the rhythmic notation differs in the various drafts and edited versions of *Le Testament*, the pitches and intervals remain basically the same (*Literary Modernism* 83). It is likely that Pound’s *intended* rhythms stayed the same throughout the compositions, too, even though the rhythmic notation became increasingly complex. If we are to take Pound’s theory of harmony seriously—that “A SOUND OF ANY PITCH, or ANY COMBINATION OF SUCH SOUNDS, MAY BE FOLLOWED BY ANY OTHER PITCH, OR ANY COMBINATION OF SUCH

\textsuperscript{67} This was also Bedford’s complaint: “I think it makes it almost infinitely difficult unless you keep the same [value] in each bar—as many different numbers of beats as you like, but the value the same as 3/8 5/8 4/8 3/8 but not 3/8 1/2 5/32 11/16 this continual arithmetic makes it extremely hard for the singer. I still think it’s possible to get the same effect” (Bedford to Pound, 1931; EPP).

\textsuperscript{68} As Schafer notes, “Antheil had a very special influence on the poet’s thought, though it may not have been an entirely healthy influence. For Antheil was concerned with the precisioning of musical notation to a point where all ambiguity was eliminated between the printed shapes of music and their living sounds in performance” (“Developing Theories” 29). Pound absorbed Antheil’s position, not recognizing its ultimate impracticability.
SOUNDS, providing the time interval between them is properly gauged” (Treatise 10)—we must assume that he chose the melody (and harmony, such as it is) based on an already conceived notion of the work’s metrics. Because the pitches do not change or change only occasionally (and then very slightly) in the various drafts of Le Testament, we can assume that neither did Pound’s conception or intention of the metrics; according to Pound’s own theory, a significant change in the metrics would have necessitated a corresponding change in the melody and harmony. Thus though I agree that the use of micro-rhythms to notate the work’s metrics in the Antheil version does in fact demonstrate “the strain under which rhythm is placed in the service of proving the case for the definitive or ‘absolute’ rhythm configurations” (Bucknell, Literary Modernism 84), I read Pound’s obsessive focus on perfecting the metrics of the opera, compared to his relative satisfaction with the pitches, as a poet attempting to find a musical notation adequate for his essentially literary project: translation. As a translation, the opera is a pedagogical project, not only teaching us what the poetry says (its “sense”), but how it says it (its “music”). Setting the words to music allows Pound to transcribe accurately this second goal of translation (and, as I shall later argue, assists in the former goal, too), but only if he can find a precise method of recording the poetry’s “music” (pronunciation, diction, rhythm etc.) in musical terms.

In each successive draft, the ratio of the essential time lengths that Pound ascribes to each syllable are very similar: in performance, the difference between the drafts would be one of degree—roughly equivalent to the variations in any individual performances of a given musical work. A handwritten note by Pound on the Antheil score of Le Testament suggests as much: “[i]n the case of the simpler notation used for Paris the performer is
asked to understand that the music was not suffered to be changed. The difference is the graph.” Pound’s difficulty in finding a way to notate precisely the work’s rhythm appears to stem not from a deficiency in available notational methods, but, as Rudge argued in the lengthy letter to Pound discussing the opera, from his own confusion of “time length and accents” (October 1924; ORP). Ironically, in his quest to dictate not only the metrics of his score but also the rhythmic nuances that are usually (and especially with singers) left for individual interpretation, Pound ended up with a score that was, as Rudge remarked in the same letter quoted above, an indication of “how accurate a recording instrument George’s ear is,” not, as Pound wished, a definitive instruction as to how the music of Villon’s poetry should be articulated. In opera, the rhythm of the vocal line is at least partially dependent on the libretto; in Pound’s operas, the rhythm of the vocal and accompanying line is entirely derived from the text, which is not only the focus, but also the impetus, for the work.

Pound learned a great deal from his experience composing *Le Testament* and eventually having it produced by the BBC as *The Testament of François Villon*: namely, that if opera as translation is to work, the opera has to be performable. After completing his second opera, *Cavalcanti*, Pound admitted as much in a letter to Bedford: “New show much more ‘musical’. Gheez I had orter have learned something since 1920!!!” (7 June 1932; qtd. in Fisher and Hughes 82 n218). Unlike the difficult *Le Testament*, *Cavalcanti* was composed with its performers’ needs in mind: singers were consulted as to the limits of their range,⁶⁹ Pound returned to Bedford for help, and, after hearing the disappointing

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⁶⁹ In an undated letter (c.1932) from Raymonde Collignon to Pound, the singer responds to Pound’s specific question about the possibilities of singing a large interval (EPP), and in another letter from that
results of his score in its first rehearsal in 1924, he absorbed finally Rudge’s early
critique of *Le Testament*. Having realized that Antheil’s notation, while an accurate
transcription of his own “performance” of the opera, was impracticable in performance
and unnecessarily difficult, Pound wrote to Bedford of the Antheil score: “very valuable
to me BUT [of] no practical use” (21 January 1926; qtd. in Fisher and Hughes 30). Thus
*Cavalcanti*, Pound’s second attempt at opera as translation, is not characterized by the
virtually un-performable metrical notation of the Antheil version of *Le Testament*, but
instead uses, as both Rudge and Bedford had earlier suggested, time signatures in regular
meters and with common denominators. Gone are the double dotted rhythms and rapidly
changing, unusual meters of the Antheil version of *Le Testament*. As opposed to
successive bars of 22/16, 12/16, 9/16, 22/16, 11/8, 14/8, 27/16, and 31/32 that Antheil
used to score the first eight bars of “Dame du Ciel,” for instance, in *Cavalcanti*, the only
nonstandard meters are 1/4 and 5/4, and the changing meters have common denominators
in all but three places: the overture, which moves from 2/2 to 3/4 (2); the first aria, “Poi
che di doglia,” which also moves between 2/2 and 3/4 (4–5); and “Perch’io non spero,”
when the meter briefly moves to 3/8 for a bar then moves back to 3/4 (155).

The move away from what Pound called “fractional metrics” shows us that Pound
wanted *Cavalcanti* performed (qtd. in Fisher and Hughes 30)—that these operatic
endeavors were not elitist projects or closet operas designed only for advanced
musicologists. The simplified metrics also demonstrate that Pound’s former concern, as

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year, from Gustave Ferrari to Harding, Ferrari also responds to questions, presumably from Pound, about
his voice:

Enclosed the required information about my voice and its possibilities of noise! I should be
delighted to sing another work of Pound, if the occasion arises of doing so. If he is kind enough to
send me copies of some of the songs he intends to give me, I will be able to judge if they lie well
in my voice. (6 April 1932; EPP)
expressed by the rapid succession of nonstandard meters and the absence of a regular pulse in *Le Testament*, was not to experiment with the sounds created by complex rhythms *per se* (though this may very well have been Antheil’s intent), but to find a way to record most precisely what, in early writings on translation, he called the “music” of poetry. After all, in listening to the Fantasy Recording of *Le Testament*, which was based on the Antheil score, it is immediately apparent, first, that many of the rhythms in the work are not nearly as difficult as the notation would imply, and second, that the songs do have a regular pulse.

Fisher and Hughes argue that the “metrical simplicity” of *Cavalcanti* indicates that Pound “was no longer interested in the challenge and goal of translating the exact micrometric equivalent of the spoken word into notation” (82). This should not be taken to mean, however, that in *Cavalcanti* Pound is any less concerned with precision: the score is prefaced with a list of “General Directions” to the orchestra (x); metronome markings, together with traditional English and Italian phrases like “robustly, but with mockery,” which prefices “Gianni quel Guido,” or “Moto perpetuo, marcato robusta,” which prefices “Guarda ben dico,” consistently detail the exact tempo Pound wanted in every section. And accents and other agogic markings make the intended inflections in the text clear. Though unlike *Le Testament*, *Cavalcanti* is, as Fisher and Hughes note, in more of a *bel canto* style (82), Pound’s aim in the second opera is nevertheless essentially the same as it was for *Le Testament*: “to take the world’s greatest poetry out of books, to

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70 This is backed up by the fact that in 1933, Pound again returned to *Le Testament*, rescoreing it into standard meters. Writing to Bedford, he notes: “Have just simplified most of the Villon notation—I am going back to see if I have re-reduced it to just where ‘we’ i.e. you first put it” (qtd. in Fisher and Hughes 84).
put it on the air to bring it to the ear of the people, even when they cannot understand it, or cannot understand all of it at once” (“Preface,” Cavalcanti vi). Thus his interest in precisely notating the words did not change, though his method did. Once Pound discovered the use of accents and gracenotes as an alternative means of scripting precise rhythms, he abandoned Antheil’s technique of “fractional metrics” in favor of a technique he could use without the heavy assistance of an amanuensis.71 Though Bedford continued to assist Pound by answering questions about Cavalcanti, she notes in a later letter to Dorothy Pound that she “never transcribed the Cavalcanti from his dictation,” continuing, “[a]s far as I know he did it all himself as he had then mastered musical notation” (19 November 1967; qtd. in Fisher and Hughes 20).

**Opera as Translation in Performance**

But this new method of simpler metrics also meant that Pound had to begin to trust his singers and performers, both to interpret correctly the notation marks on the score and to “get inside” the poetry itself.72 The immediate difference between musical or theatrical works and non-theatrical literary works is that the former (except in improvisational performances) exist in two versions: the script, be it musical, literary, or

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71 Advice on alternative ways to score rhythmic inflections in a letter written from Bedford to Pound soon after the Villon broadcast indicates that Pound was actively looking for a better way to notate the Cavalcanti score: “I think your idea about the rest with value of appoggiatura . . . is quite sound if explained first & enclosed in brackets—better than comma above the line, which is seldom used except for vocalists, & does not give quite the same effect anyway. I should add an accent to mark the note following rest . . . I don’t approve of Antheil score notation” (no date; EPP).

72 A comment Rudge makes in a letter to Pound about the Antheil notation reminds Pound that he must begin to trust his singers to interpret the music of the literary text: “I have told you over and over that if I get the stuff right from the George mss—it is because I am following the words which I know practically by heart—after all the troubadours found the matter easy enough” (20 October 1924; ORP). By 1936, Pound seems to have come around to Rudge’s position, writing in “Music and Brains” (for The Listener): “You don’t need to drive your players through a course in philology, but a moderate and brief introduction to at least the fact that poetry has existed, that literature has existed, that a cultural heritage has existed, could be introduced into musical education, with, I think, gain both to players and hearers” (EP and Music 408).
some combination of the two, and the realization of that script in performance. No two realizations of a script are ever the same; in this way, musical and theatrical texts are continually re-made, but also, in this way, the resulting works are ever distanced from their “scripters.” As is clear from his music reviews and other writings on music, Pound had very definite ideas as to how music ought to be interpreted—and it was with minimal interference from the performer, or “executant”: “[t]he wobbling about by deficient musicians, the attempt to give life to a piece by abundant rallentandos and speedings up, results in reduction of all music to one doughy mass and all compositions to the one statement of the performing executant, said wobbly time is due to their NOT divining the real pace of the segment” (Kulchur 233). For Pound, the performer is merely the instrument through which the composer’s ideas are realized—superior artistry comes from the clarification of a composer’s intentions, not the remaking of the composition through a brilliant interpretation. “Even with the best devices [in notation],” writes Pound in Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony, “there will be enough left to the feel of the great interpreter. A great performer will always have chance enough to show his superiority in the mise au point or in the comprehension of his authors” (135).

Moreover, the interpretive reality of performed works is a fact not particularly amenable to the very idea of translation—which is itself already an interpretive act. To layer one interpretive act (the performance of the opera) on another (the score—Pound’s operatic translation) doubly distances the work from its original author and potentially damages the “accuracy” of the first interpretive act—the translation. For Pound, the musical score “is an intellectual structure that should not be made subordinate to the performance and the performing musicians” (Byron 170). This helps to explain Pound’s
obsessive concern with precise notation, as evidenced not only by his musical scores, but also by his rejoinder to the editor of *The Musical Times* who complained in a review of *Guide to Kulchur* that Pound would not “admit that a composer’s intentions are not adequately expressed on paper and that the performer must ‘interpret’ . . . them”: “good composers,” replied Pound, “WRITE down what they want played, but duds (meaning most of the composers since Rossini) simply have NOT had any really accurate intentions as to the durations of their notes. Strawinsky [sic] has” (January, 1939; *EP and Music* 444). 73

Unsurprisingly, given these comments, Pound is reluctant to trust any interpretive decisions to the singers of his operas, as the warning (as spoken through Antheil) that prefaces *Le Testament* makes clear:

> As the opera is written in such a manner that nothing at all is left to the singer, the editor would be obliged if the singer would not let the least bit of temperament affect in the least the correct singing of this opera, which is written as it sounds. Please do not embarrass us by suddenly developing intelligence.

Ideally, for Pound and Antheil, the singer is, like any other musical instrument, inanimate—without “intelligence”; in this way, Pound becomes both composer and performer, operating the singer’s voice through his score. Pound used translations to

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73 The contentious original passage in *Guide to Kulchur* reads, in part:

> The really fine musician has this sense of time-division and/or duration. An alteration of it inadvisably or needlessly, for any cause not inherent in the composer’s pattern, is bad music, bad playing. . . . The theory . . . that there can be no absolute rendering of the composer’s design, ultimately destroys all composition, it undermines all values, all hierarchy of values. . . . There is an enormous leeway even in the best graph. BUT it is a leeway of force and quality, not of duration, or in the lapse of very small time intervals between the beginning of notes. (197-8)

Earlier, in “T. S. Eliot” (published in 1917), however, Pound admitted: “You can not force a person to play a musical masterpiece correctly, even by having the notes ‘correctly printed’ on the paper before him; neither can you force a person to feel the movement of poetry, be the metre ‘regular’ or ‘irregular’” (*LE* 422).
make poets and their works come alive for an audience incapable of experiencing the work in its original tongue; though he recognized that he was always creating a new work in his translations, he ultimately viewed translation as a way to bring an unknown or undervalued poet into the public’s consciousness. (This, of course, echoes nicely his role as a discoverer of living “geniuses” in the twentieth century.) Therefore, opera as translation is designed to teach us how (and whom) to read, not to act as a springboard for another reading potentially unconnected to the original work. Pound was, as Eliot noted, “first and foremost, a teacher and a campaigner” (xii)—or as Stein less kindly remembers, a “village explainer, excellent if you were a village, but if you were not, not” (*Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 217).

Of course, as Bucknell notes, there is a potential incongruence between what Antheil says—seemingly with Pound’s approval—and what Pound adds in a handwritten note directly below Antheil’s comment: “I doubt if the instrumentalist will get much help from ‘counting measures.’ Let him learn the words and make his noises when the singer reaches the syllable the instrument is to emphasize” (“Foreword” *Le Testament*).

Bucknell suggests that “the old tangle between the demand for precise technique and the overcoming of that technique plays itself out . . . in the unacknowledged divergence in the words of Antheil and Pound” (*Literary Modernism* 83), which is undoubtedly correct. But there is less divergence of opinion between Pound and Antheil than would first appear, since Pound’s instructions here are to the instrumentalists, not the singers, as Antheil’s are. His point is merely that the instrumentalists should follow the singers
(who in turn should be following Pound via the score), and not offer a competing musical text of their own.\footnote{Rudge’s comment in a letter to Pound, when she questions his practice “[o]f insulting the singers when one has an opera that needs so many good ones,” seems to indicate that Pound indeed shared Antheil’s disparaging view of singers (20 October 1924; ORP).}

The point is that here, the singer’s traditional function in opera—to create a role, to add an interpretive text to the work, to showcase the ineffable power of his/her voice—is negated almost entirely by the composer’s heavy-handed instructions. The singer’s role in these “translations” is only to vocalize the text. There is no fetishistic attraction to the sheer power of the voice—song exists to draw attention to the words, the rhythm of the poetry, the sound of the language. Whereas Joyce’s tireless promotion of the Irish tenor John Sullivan betrays a fascination with the operatic voice (see Ellmann 619-21), Pound’s disparagement of the operatic singer as “200 kilograms of female meat emitting a few liquid high notes but unable to contract any of her muscle enough to express any of that understanding of the composer’s meaning” in an unpublished seven-page typescript titled “Opera: Opry Out of Doors” reveals a complete antipathy to the fetishization of the voice as voice-object (July-September 1938; EPP).\footnote{Even when Pound concedes the skill of a composer who exploits the power of the singing voice, like Puccini, it is in language that is utterly dismissive: “and to give hell its due, Puccini knows how to write for the bawlers. I mean he KNOWS how. If that’s what you like, be damned to you for liking it, but I take off my hat (along with your own beastly bowler) to the artifex” (Kulchur 155).}

Given this vociferous and ungenerous characterization of the operatic voice, it may seem strange indeed to suggest that in his operas Pound finds the voice useful for what Roland Barthes describes as its grain, “that culmination (or depth) of production where melody actually works on language—not what it says but the voluptuous pleasure of its signifier sounds,” though it should be remembered that Barthes specifies in this essay that he is not referring to the
operatic voice, likely for the same sort of reason that Pound requests un-operatic voices for his operas (271). Barthes argues that it is in “the diction of language,” where the grain of the voice signifies (271, italics in original). The particular signification that grain affords cannot be articulated in precise terms—and we cannot be sure that it sufficiently translates the meaning of the poem attached to the voice. Yet, for Pound, it does convey the aesthetic value of the poem that exists beyond its “sense”—not, significantly, by appealing to the linguistically transcendent qualities of music, but by using the music to more forcefully direct the ear to the music in the language of the poem. As Michael Coyle puts it, referencing a comment about poetic rhythm that Pound makes in 1934 to explain the music he would eventually use in Canto 75, “music was a way of guiding the reader’s performance or interpretation of language, a means of ‘forcing’ the observation of relations that were in ‘the nature of the verse,’ as opposed to relations that were merely the product of interpretation” (166).

Until the opportunity of broadcasting Le Testament presented itself, Pound always intended the work to be staged, and even after it was broadcast as The Testament of

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76 In a letter to Yeats in which Pound suggests that the Abbey Theatre mount Le Testament, Pound makes his preference clear: “I DO NOT want operatic voices, I want a few singers who can understand the text” (qtd. in Carpenter 436). The production never happened; as Pound, later remembering, notes, “20 years ago one thought the revival of the Beggars Opera might lead to something . . . . Yeats assured me that the Abbey Theatre was useless for these purposes” (1939; from a 9-page typescript, “Mozart in Rapallo”; EPP).
François Villon, Pound envisioned having the work adapted into film. Unsurprisingly, Pound had very definite ideas as to how Le Testament should be presented theatrically: he subtitled the opera “A Melodrama” and outlined specific stage instructions in two separate one-page typescripts. Significantly, all of his directions limit expressivity and call to mind Noh theatre. Le Testament, as Pound reveals here, “was written for masks” that “wd. [sic] have heightened the upper part of the face, been flexible at the sides, waxed to the cheeks but leaving the jaw free,” though he concedes that the same effect could be achieved with stylized makeup. Repeated in both typescripts is the injunction that Villon is to remain “completely immobile from start to finish” so as to contrast with the “figety [sic]” characters and their highly stylized movements (“jerking thumb over shoulder,” “nervous swinging of arms from right to left, left to right,” etc.). Though the gestures “are not to be puppet gestures,” such extreme stylization would have the effect of dehumanizing the actors by restricting creative and interpretive expression. Indeed, Pound instructs that the actors are to be “theoretically invisible” when they are without words to sing. In essence, the proposed staging produces the same effect of the minimalist musical accompaniment: it focuses the listener

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77 As a promotional piece for the broadcast of the BBC broadcast indicates, Pound was thinking about adapting the work for film even before it was ready for radio. The project never panned out, but his comments are interesting, particularly for the focus he gives to rhythm in the opera:

If a broadcast serves to get the idea into the head of the sound-film people, that would be a step forward. And one could get an unvarying record at least of the rhythm, provided one had first got that into the head of the conductor and the conductor had managed to get that into the singers and the singers refrained from forgetting it at the crucial moment. . . . At any rate the sound film is more interesting than opera. . . . With a good cameraman and efficient direction one could have a lot more fun with a film than would be possible with the utterly idiotic and muttonheaded obstacles offered to modern opera production. (“Ezra Pound’s Opera ‘Heaulmière,’ [sic] With Villon’s Words, To Be Broadcast”)

78 Neither typescript is dated, although it is likely they were drawn up in preparation for the Paris performances (1924 and 1926). The first typescript is titled “Staging of the Villon” and provides general instructions regarding costume, staging, and gesture (Ezra Pound Papers Addition). The second typescript is a sketch showing the general movement of the opera (EPP).
on the words, literally drawing our attention to the mouths that sing the text and away from the actors who perform it (Ezra Pound Papers Addition).

When Pound turns to radio, he necessarily dispenses with the visual aspects of theatrical presentations. In their place, he creates a cast of characters with connecting dialogue in colloquial English that serves as a substitute for the dramatic apparatus of the staged version. The dialogue is integrated into the musical numbers, responding to and anticipating the arias without claiming anywhere near a complete translation of the poems: it is only in the comprehension of the opera as a whole that the poet’s work comes alive for an audience separated from the poetry by language, culture, and time. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this dialogue (though thoroughly Poundian in character) is its use of coarse slang. After the character Villon sings the aria based on the famous poem, “Dictes moy” or “Mais où sont les neiges d’antan” (“Where are the snows of yesteryear”), for instance, the “puzzled” barman responds: “I dunno, I dunno where yer snows are gone, I dunno” (in Fisher, *EP’s Radio Operas* 209). From an artistic point of view, the choice is sound, since it accords with the thematic tone of the poetry. But Harding had to work hard to convince his superiors at the BBC of the merits of the unconventional pairing of archaic French poetry and English slang. As Fisher notes, “[t]hree approaches to Pound’s script were given serious consideration: connective dramatic text in English slang, connective dramatic text in French, and a narrator’s text in standard English” (*EP’s Radio Operas* 93). Only the first approach—Pound’s own choice—would work in harmony with the goals of translation, however, since it would allow for the instruction that the second approach would deny and the artistic cohesion that the third approach would disrupt. Indeed, the combination of the archaic foreign
tongue of the libretto and the English “slang” of the connecting dialogue is perhaps the clearest indication that Pound’s operas act as translations; if the operas were designed merely to present the poetry, arguably, there would be no need to include dialogue, or to mix languages, as Pound does.79

The non-competing musical text, the unrelenting emphasis on the word, the limited role of the voice, and the restrictive staging instructions—all of these factors ultimately result in the negation of opera’s complex temporality, rendering Le Testament and Cavalcanti distinctly un-operatic operas. The simultaneity of music is de-emphasized by the sparse, non-chordal orchestration, and the double temporality of the combination of poetry and music is de-emphasized by the exclusive focus on the word: everything moves horizontally, following the rhythmic progression of the text. This situation, creating as it does a distinctly linear apprehension of a work, is in curious contrast to the ideogramic method that Pound championed using words that call to mind the rhetoric typically used to describe the “magical” properties of music’s multileveled layers of significance. Compare, for instance, Pound’s comment in “How to Read,” that “the magic of music is in its effect on volition. A sudden clearing of the rubbish and re-establishment of a sense of proportion” (LE 25-6), to his assertion in Guide to Kulchur that “[t]he ideogramic method consists of presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader’s mind, onto a

79 Pound makes the purpose of mixing languages clear in his instruction to the audience that prefaces his second opera, Cavalcanti: “[t]he poems are left in the original, the dialog into English so that you can follow the play” (vi).
part that will register” (51).\(^8^0\) James Anderson Winn suggests that “Pound’s fascination with Chinese ideograms, beyond their alleged visual expression, lay in the fact that one ideogram might be made out of several others like a chord out of several notes” (297)—a point which Alexander Schmitz queries in “Ideogram-Audiogram,” which begins: “Doesn’t it seem astonishing that of all poets it is the Pound of the ideographic structures . . . who in his musical works . . . appears to be explicitly . . . linear . . . much more indebted to melody than to harmony?” (44). The irony is heightened because ideograms, like music, “are performative, that is, they are kinetic” (Jung 216, italics in original). Yet for all the musical associations of ideograms, when Pound writes opera—an artistic project naturally attuned to the simultaneous layering of associations—instead of exploiting the possibilities of the multidimensionality of music and opera, he finds precision in stripping away layers of significance. Though this incongruence is difficult to reconcile, it is partially explained when we view the operas as translations, as alternatives to a literary activity. That is, the non-literary aspects of opera are engaged only to assist in the translation of the poetry—to direct our ears and mind to the words and their meanings—not for any effect they might produce in and of themselves. It is also a consequence of Pound’s conception of music as rhythm, which has the effect of defining music by its linear movement in time rather than its “verticality,” its ability to produce simultaneity.

**Translating the Sense**

\(^8^0\) The ideogramic method is of course an extension of Imagism and of a piece with the notion of “spatial form,” the latter of which has, according to Joseph Frank, profoundly influenced “our modern idea of the nature of poetry” (11).
Theoretically, it is by way of the exact enunciation of the word, as supported by music, and the creation of dramatic scenario, by way of the selection of poems, that Pound translates both the music and the meaning of the poetic text; through this process, the listener then understands the “emotion and beauty” of the poems. In practice, however, translating the meaning of the poems is an endeavor fraught with uncertainty. Though the connecting dialogue in the radio version and the stylized movements of the staged version assist in the translation of the poem’s semantic meaning, they by no means convey the complete lexical substance of the poetry. Thus, however aptly the operatic treatment of Pound’s poets achieves one goal of translation (translating the work’s “music”), it would appear to be deficient in its communication of what would usually be considered the most important goal of translation: the sense of the poem. Indeed, paradoxically, translating the sense of the poetry would seem to be made extraordinarily difficult in Pound’s operas because Pound so completely de-emphasizes the non-linguistic aspects of opera—the accompanying music, the expressivity of the singing voice, and the dramatic apparatus—in his attempt to focus the listener on the words. In a letter to Pound prior to the BBC broadcast, Harding assures his poet/composer that “[t]he combination of the voice with the instruments, and the rhythm of words to music, will make [the listener] feel what he can’t constater [sic] intellectually” (15 April 1931; EPP).81 Harding’s assurance notwithstanding, the idea that a transcendental quality in the music’s rhythm will translate “what [the listener] can’t constater intellectually” seems to be particularly unsatisfying here because Pound rejected the notion of music as an

81 This comment sounds very much like Virgil Thomson’s comment about setting Stein texts: “My theory was that if a text is set correctly for the sound of it, the meaning will take care of itself” (Virgil Thomson 90).
emotionally mimetic art form and because he focused on the words almost to the exclusion of all non-rhythmic aspects of the music. Moreover, the comment also hints at the point Bucknell makes above: that at some point, technique must be transcended by something else—something beyond the precise rendering of the composer’s marks—to translate the emotion and beauty of the poem.

And yet, Pound was unwavering in his belief that he accomplished both goals of translation with his operas. Writing retrospectively of the BBC broadcast of The Testament of François Villon, he claims: “Whatever the demerits of the work, this much is established: I sat in the electrician’s kitchen in Rapallo when the Villon was broadcast from London, and I not only knew who was singing (as far as the singers were known to me), but I could distinguish the words, and the sense of the words” (Kulchur 366). The comment is of course qualified by Pound’s singular ability, as composer, poet, and linguist, to “distinguish” the sense of the words. But it is nevertheless interesting that Pound thought the opera a capable enough translation so as to be understood by the everyman evoked in the inclusion of the detail that he was sitting in an “electrician’s kitchen” when he first heard the broadcast. Indeed, Pound hints in the preface to his operatic rendering of Cavalcanti that the beauty and emotion of the poems—the untranslatable aspects of language—may, somehow, be conveyed by the nonlinguistic aspects of opera, even for those who “cannot understand” the poems: “[t]he meaning can be explained but the emotion and beauty can not be explained” (vi). And in the same essay from Guide to Kulchur quoted above, Pound would go even a step further, writing that the music of Le Testament “is to that extent a comment on, or an elucidation of, the form of the words and possibly of their meaning, or, if you like, of the emotive contents”
(366), which sounds very much like the vague equation of sound and feeling at the heart of the romantic expressive programmatic music Pound disparaged. It is at this point—where Pound shows himself attempting to translate the sense, the emotion, the beauty of the poems—that the poet-composer runs into the same problem he identifies and critiques as a negative characteristic of program music, for the use of music to represent “emotion and beauty” is easily reduced to a simplistic but vague equation of sound and feeling that ultimately denudes the original text of its affective quality and clearly conflicts with Pound’s call for “harder and saner” poetry, “austere, direct, free from emotional slither” (*LE* 12).\(^82\)

In program music, literature is rendered music through some form of mimesis. To take as my example Richard Strauss, a composer who infamously exploited the mimetic possibilities of music, in the *depictive* approach, noises and sounds, which often represent things or ideas, are essentially transliterated into musical sounds, like the cry of the baby in *Sinfonia Domestica*. In the *narrative* approach, the music follows a pre-existing literary program that renders the story in music, as in *Don Quixote*. In the *expressive* approach—the most vague of all—certain feelings or ideas are loosely equated with musical moods, as in the “powerful” opening of *Also sprach Zarathustra* (see Locke). Of these approaches, Pound found only the depictive mode acceptable. Though Pound could abide representational music, like Janequin’s “Chanson des Oiseaux,” which he famously included in Canto 75, like Lessing, he found the use of one art form to do the work of another, on the whole, to be unacceptable: “Music must appeal to the ear, not the eye; it

\(^82\)Admittedly Pound would deny a distinction between rhythm and any other aspect of music; for him, music, including harmony, pitch, and melody, *is* rhythm (see Treatise, especially 24-7). Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that the music of his operas takes a secondary role to the words of the libretti.
must not conjure up scenes or visions or objects” (Adams, “Musical Neofism” 51).

Though this general distaste for confusing the senses would seem to preclude opera as a means to translate literature, it is important to remember, as Pound notes in “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,” that poetry “is an art of pure sound bound in through an art of arbitrary and conventional symbols. In so far as it is an art of pure sound, it is allied with music, painting, sculpture; in so far as it is an art of arbitrary symbols, it is allied to prose” (Selected Prose 33-4). Thus poetry—particularly melopoeic poetry—is already a kind of hybrid genre, encompassing equally the media of language and music.

Though music, like language, is devoid of representational “meaning”—as Pound puts it, “[a] word exists when two or more people agree to mean the same thing by it” (Selected Prose 34)—it does signify through the cultural associations that are assumed by certain sounds, chord progressions, even tempi. Thus in the last aria of Le Testament—the “Frères Humains”—the meaning of the poem to which the words are set is suggested or evoked by the choral, hymn-like sound of the chorus because of our associations with this kind of polyphony and spiritual, solemn occasions. Such an association can neither be proven nor disproven, but even without the existence of a musical “dictionary” where one could look up the definitions of certain sounds, it nevertheless exists—indeed, one might say that such signaling cannot be avoided. Following this basic assumption about the ability of music to have and make cultural meaning, we might say that Pound

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83 Among the “don’ts” tabulated in “A Retrospect” are: “Don’t be ‘viewy’—leave that to the writers of pretty little philosophic essays. Don’t be descriptive; remember that the painter can describe a landscape much better than you can, and that he has to know a deal more about it” and “Don’t mess up the perception of one sense by trying to define it in terms of another” (LE 6, 7). In “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris” he is explicit: “I am in sympathy equally with those who insist that there is one art and many media, and with those who cry out against the describing of work in any particular art by a terminology borrowed from all the others” (Selected Prose 35).
translates the bawdiness of “Heaulmière” by having an un-operatic voice deliver the aria. He demonstrates drunkenness in Bozo’s song, “Si j’ayme se sers la belle,” by vocalizing hiccoughs and asking the trombones, which he elsewhere called the “traditional sign of boracchios [drinking]” (qtd. in Carpenter 389), to play “as rowdily & boozily as possible” (Le Testament 66). He depicts the crowd’s general drunkenness in “Père Noé” by composing the tune in the lilting rhythms of a drinking song and instructing the chorus “to increase the pandemonia as [the song] goes along” (Le Testament 70), in distinct contrast to the smooth counterpoint of the much slower, a cappella final number, “Frères Humains.” Evocative as these depictive strategies are, however, they are decidedly imprecise, at best translating broad emotions or ideas without subtlety, and at worst, caricaturing the text. I belabour the point because to attempt to argue that Pound translates the sense of the poetry through the use of either depictive programmatic musical strategies or the more vague notion of music or rhythm’s transcendent ability conflicts not only with Pound’s estimation of Villon as a poet “so absolute” that he “could not be translated” by language alone (Kenner, Pound Era 389), but also with Pound’s general dismissal of program music’s tendency toward a kind of emotionally onomatopoetic music, a dismissal which in turn mirrors the pioneering technique of his literary translations: instead of the pedantic translations of his nineteenth-century literary predecessors that focused on the literal meaning of the words and rigid verse forms, Pound opted for a translation practice that prioritized the overall meaning or vision of the poem in its original tongue and culture over word-for-word accuracy and “proper” versification.
But as translation theorists acknowledge, there is this room for error and incompleteness in all translations: as many critics have noted of Pound’s literary translations, particularly his translations of Chinese poetry, for this reason, the works are more accurately described as “re-creations,” not translations (see Callahan 151, Yip 164). Indeed, one critic concludes that in Pound’s “process of misinterpretation” in the Cathay poems, “the ‘cuts and turns’ of the mind of the originals are largely preserved, although Pound’s ignorance of the Chinese language and Fenollosa’s crippled texts occasionally led him into blind alleys” (Yip 164); yet another argues that the Cathay poems “can be seen as artistic testaments to displaced meaning. They incorporate, in their very operation, an understanding of the fact that meaning exists not locked inside the word but only in the mind of the reader” (Callahan 152). Pound himself, in a discussion of English translations, remarks that “FitzGerald made the only good poem of the time that has gone to the people; it is called, and is to a great extent, a trans-or mistrans-lation” (LE 34), and in his defense of the possible “atrocities” of his literary translation of Cavalcanti, claimed: “all that can be said in excuse is that they [the atrocities] are, I hope, for the most part intentional, and committed with the aim of driving the reader’s perception further into the original than it would without them have penetrated” (LE 172). Viewed in this larger tradition of translation’s happy errors, the gaps in the operas can be seen as inevitable; they remind us of the insufficiency of the word in all translations and further suggest music as a universal language capable of bridging linguistic barriers. Indeed, harping on the translation of the ostensibly literal meaning of the libretti is in some respects missing the point altogether, since “Pound tried to circumvent the pollution of the ‘poetic fact’ by referring the reader back to the original perception which had
produced significance in the poet, and hoped that his perception would produce a similar significance in the reader” (Callahan 164). In the end, getting at the poetry’s sense is a process not tied to translating the poet’s words at all, but instead, to translating the poet’s original perception, a task which opera may very well accomplish better than language, if we are to believe Pound that “music is perhaps the bridge between consciousness and the unthinking sentient or even insentient universe” (LE 26).84

Conclusion

Whether or not we can agree with Pound’s romantic conception of music’s ability to transcend language is not really the point, however, because what really distinguishes Pound’s operatic from his literary translations is not so much their relative “effectiveness” as translations, but the wider cultural significance of opera, an elitist genre traditionally designed to entertain, being adopted in the service of an educative project, the ultimate aim of which is to democratize poetry. Le Testament and Cavalcanti are hardly in the operatic tradition; indeed in many respects they are anti-operas, rejecting opera’s multilayered levels of signification, its fetishistic concentration on the operatic voice, and its innate sense of theatricality in favor of an obsessive focus on language. But these anti-operas were never designed to work like traditional operas: like so many of Pound’s activities, opera as translation is, ultimately, an educative project—both teaching an audience a new language and bringing to an audience’s attention poets largely forgotten by history. The goal in the operas is to disseminate poetic material to an audience who, presumably, would not otherwise experience such material. Pound could

84 See The Pound Era, where Kenner summarizes Pound’s repeated injunctions to various translators to remember that “[t]he poem is not its language.” “Don’t bother about the WORDS,” writes Pound, “translate the MEANING” (150).
have found a musico-literary alternative to opera—like Edith Sitwell’s *Façade* (1922), written around the same time as *Le Testament*—but opera, like the American Hour program in Rapallo, provided him with something lacking in these alternatives: a classroom.

In the operas, Pound recreates both the poetry and the world of his poetic figures, making what was once new in the literary world, new again; but by using opera as a vehicle for this project, for this “translation of accompaniment,” he very consciously makes opera new, too. In “Villon and Comment,” Pound wrote that his operatic experiments will “not lead to a revolution of opera because there ARE NOT THE AVAILABLE VERBAL TEXTS to go on with” (*Kulchur* 366). The comment, together with his involvement with Antheil and the contemporary music scene, clearly indicates that in his operas, in addition to translating, disseminating, and teaching the Troubadours, Pound was working actively to reform the genre itself. In part, this reform amounts to the literary reclamation of a genre that was birthed in literary circles but gradually became co-opted by musicians, eventually becoming the primarily musical genre it was in Pound’s day. The revolution about which Pound speaks will not happen because, as he emphasizes with his characteristic upper-case typography, there are not the texts to go on with, a problem no amount of musical reform can solve: “[w]hen Antheil and Serly wanted a body of English verbal materia, it just wasn’t THERE to be musick’d. Lay aside the fact that Antheil hadn’t the verbal culture necessary for a Pericles, Shakespeare’s Pericles is not a libretto” (*Kulchur* 367). For Pound, opera is valuable only for its ability to enhance a literary work. Though Pound went to extraordinary lengths to educate himself about musical theory, as Schafer notes, his attitude towards
music is still “conditioned by his profession” as a poet (“Ezra Pound and Music”129), which is partly why in the Poundian conception of “opera made new,” music will always take a backseat to language.

But as borne out in *Le Testament* and *Cavalcanti*, opera, as translation, becomes more than “musick’d” literature (*Kulchur* 367): it ultimately transforms a genre famous for its musical and bourgeois entertainment value into a pedagogical poetic platform that, arguably, has more in common with a text like *ABC of Reading* or *Guide to Kulchur* than any opera “William Atheling” would have reviewed. As a genre typically designed to entertain, opera emerges as the ideal—if ironic—platform for this project. It has a built-in audience that, while still select, moves beyond the rarified, elite worlds of a project like Yeats and Dolmetsch’s intoned poetic evenings, especially when that audience is expanded to include the BBC’s listeners.85 This is particularly important for Pound, a man who, as Eliot noted, “has always been impelled, not merely to find out for himself how poetry should be written, but to pass on the benefits of his discoveries to others; not simply to makes these benefits available, but to insist upon their being received” (“Introduction,” *LE* xii). Opera requires little overt participation, or pre-training, to enjoy. The music works on an audience, and though musical training undoubtedly enhances an experience, opera does not require musical training to be enjoyed; similarly, nor does poetry, in this form, require extensive language training to be appreciated.

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85 Adams argues that the operas “represent an effort to use theater in a visionary way to conjure up the presence of Villon or Cavalcanti before an elite audience capable of receiving such illusions that are not quite illusions” (“Pound in the Theatre” 158), but Pound’s own remarks in the preface to *Cavalcanti*, that he wished “to take the world’s greatest poetry out of books, to put it on the air to bring it to the ear of the people, even when they cannot understand it,” along with his decision to broadcast both operas over the radio, clearly indicates that the operas were intended for a broad audience—indeed one not capable, without Pound’s operatic translation, of receiving the poetry.
Indeed, opera provides an opportunity for Pound to teach his audience the diction and the rhythm of the poetry, even if his audience is only passively listening to the work, by “sounding” the poetry through the singing voice. Finally—and perhaps most importantly—opera allows Pound to present a truly “bilingual” edition of a translation, simultaneously keeping the words (thus the music) of the poetry in the original language and using opera’s built-in dramatic and musically programmatic apparatuses to guide the listener through the “sense” of the poetry.

My use of the word “democratize” to describe the work of Pound’s operatic translations in the opening of this chapter was deliberately provocative, designed to suggest the fluidity of keywords like “democracy” and “fascism” in the modernist period. Pound’s politics, especially during World War II, cannot be redeemed by his art. But his art can help us to understand the doublesidedness of his political sympathies. While translation can be seen as “‘conquering’ another country’s literature for your own,” (Redman 81), Pound’s operatic approach to translation demonstrates an interest in preserving, not conquering, another country’s literature for the edification of a populace bound not by borders but united by radio waves. Though Pound found the notion of art as mere entertainment insulting, he did not view “serious art” and “mass culture” antagonistically; indeed, in “Murder by Capital” (1933) Pound specifically addressed this misperception, arguing, against his critics, that though “[s]erious art is unpopular at its birth . . . it ultimately forms the mass culture.”86 Because of the common linkage of

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86 In the early essay, “The Constant Preaching to the Mob” (1916), an impassioned Pound rejects that notion that “poetry is made to entertain,” ending the piece with a comment that seems to pit himself, the artist, against the masses: “Still it flatters the mob to tell them that their importance is so great that the solace of lonely men, and the lordliest of the arts, was created for their amusement” (LE 64, 65). A more
capitalism and democracy, Pound would have vociferously rejected any characterization of himself as “democratic”; yet his operatic translations show a distinctly democratic desire to transgress hierarchical definitions of art that limit reception and audience: “I have always wanted it [the Villon] sung in a baraque de foire,” he writes in Guide to Kulchur. “It will take the nasal tone of tough, open-air singing. It will stand the crack of the penny in the slot piano. It will take puppet performance” (368). As this almost Utopian assessment of his operatic translations makes clear, the promise of opera as translation is not only that the source text and the genre appropriated in the service of its translation are made new—but also, and perhaps more importantly, that both are made accessible, intellectually and materially.

mature Pound, however, sounding like Woolf in the essay, “Middlebrow,” is keen to clarify that his frustration lies not with the masses per se, but with the tastemakers who presume to speak for the masses: Yatter about art does not become a part of mass culture. Mass culture insists on the fundamental virtues which are common to Edgar Wallace and to Homer. It insists on the part of technique which is germane to both of these authors. I believe that mass culture does not ultimately resist a great deal that Mr. Wallace omitted. I think it ultimately sifts out and consigns to the ash-can a great deal that the generation of accepted authors of Mr. Arnold Bennett’s period put in. I do not believe mass culture makes any such specific and tenacious attack on good art as that which has been maintained during the last forty years of ‘capitalist, or whatever you call it’, ci—or whatever you call it—vilization. . . . When you read Homer you do not read him for tricks, but if you are engaged in the secondary activity of building up a critical faculty you might read him in order not to be fooled by tricks, by second-hand sleight of hand derivations. (Selected Prose 231-2)
Chapter 2
The Envoiced Landscape: Opera, Narrative, and Stein’s
Four Saints in Three Acts

In his discussion of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, biographer John Malcolm Brinnin suggests that opera appealed to Stein because its performative dimension had the potential to bring recognition to her work in the same manner that, in Stein’s opinion, the “history-making” Ballets Russes collaboration *Parade* (1917), for which Picasso designed the costumes and décor, had for the painter. “When a work is put on the stage,” he quotes Stein, “of course every one has to look at it and in a sense if it is put on the stage every one is forced to look and since they are forced to look at it, of course, they must accept it, there is nothing else to do” (in Stein, *Picasso* 61; qtd. in Brinnin 320). In Stein’s case, the phenomenon is doubled because the performance of her art requires hearing in addition to seeing. As Stein, explaining her distaste of “hearing any one lecture,” notes, “you do not have to look at [things seen], but things said have to be heard” (*EA* 89).

Certainly the production of *Four Saints*, coming on the heels of the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, created a public who “accepted” the “things said” by Stein’s art, and without a doubt, Stein was enormously pleased by seeing her name in lights. As Ulla E. Dydo remarks, “[f]or Stein, collaboration with a composer promised a new way to reach an audience” (*Language That Rises* 173). That

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87 The same thing that bothers Stein about plays is what bothers her about listening to lectures: “speaking voices always go at a different tempo than when you listen to them” (*EA* 89).
88 Coupled with Stein’s pleasure at her sudden fame was her concern that the American public was more interested in her than her work (*EA* 51). Indeed, Stein’s anxiety over the way in which her success and fame altered her identity personally and publicly is a recurring trope in *Everybody’s Autobiography*: “Well anyway my success did begin. . . . [I]t is funny about identity. You are you because your little dog knows you, but when your public knows you and does not want to pay for you and when your public knows you and does want to pay for you, you are not the same you” (*EA* 45).
said, the reasons for and the effect of Stein’s recourse to opera are more complicated than the thrusting of her work on an otherwise unwilling audience or, as Betsy Alayne Ryan suggests, making her written work palatable to a paying public through the addition of opera’s accoutrements (139), and they soundly contradict Richard Bridgman’s dismissive assessment of *Four Saints in Three Acts* as a work that “occupies a more important position in Gertrude Stein’s canon than its intrinsic worth can justify” (176).

As I will argue, while Stein would eventually write both operas and plays in a mode she called “landscape,” it was the newness of writing *opera* that spurred her to create this seemingly visually-oriented theatre. Landscape theatre originates in Stein’s attempt to eliminate what she called “syncopation” in the theatre: the feeling that the events on stage are progressing at a different rate than the audience can apprehend them. Landscape theatre rejects the tyranny of teleologically driven narrative; remaining always in what Stein famously termed the “continuous present,” without sacrificing the sense of movement so key to theatrical presentations, it circumvents the deferral of meaning endemic to causality-based plays. Ideally, the landscape play or opera can be perceived as complete in each moment of its production. Divested of the burden of representation, language literally takes centre stage as an autonomous art form, replacing functionality with play. Here, the text enacts its own composition through “envoicing,” an enabling alternative to the patriarchal interpretive imperative that dismantles the “authority” of authorship while leaving the authorial *voice* intact. Though Stein claimed that “I like to read with my eyes and not with my ears” (*EA* 168), explaining that “really being alone with reading is more intense than hearing anything” (*EA* 263), I argue that the operatic singing voice suggests to her the doubly participatory possibilities for linguistic play
latent in the sounding and hearing of the envoiced text. With the term “envoiced” I am drawing on Abbate’s sense of the voice-object as agency (“Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women”): I mean not just the resultant sonority of the vocalization of her words through music, but the process through which Stein’s language is accorded a physical and dramatic presence or “voice”—is en-voiced—unrelated to its narrative functionality.

If it is difficult to conceive of a genre as temporally driven as drama as landscape, as is perhaps testified by the false starts in the beginning of Four Saints, it may seem to be that much more difficult to imagine opera as landscape, since opera adds to drama the most temporal of all the arts, music (see Bowers, “The Writer” 216-7). Indeed, Four Saints in Three Acts, as Albright writes, “is one of the most remarkable experiments . . . in seeing whether the temporal media can be wrenched so strongly that they can provide the delights formerly reserved to the spatial media” (“An Opera with No Acts” 574). And yet, as Stein’s comments on Elektra, Sarah Bernhardt, Gilbert and Sullivan, and Four Saints itself show us, it was actually through thinking about, and, eventually, writing, an opera that Stein conceptualized landscape theatre, and not, as is commonly and understandably assumed, through her connection to the visual arts (see Bowers, “The Composition” 121-2). Though the specific ways in which opera facilitates the creation of a theatre that “moves but it also stays” are varied and various (LA 131), they stem from what is often considered opera’s chief limitation: the tendency of its conventions to interrupt and disrupt its narrative and dramatic impetus.

**The Making of a Librettist**

Four Saints in Three Acts both inaugurated Stein’s operatic career and marked her return to the theatre. Stein wrote some 65 plays from 1913-1923, after which her dramatic
writing halted until Virgil Thomson proposed the project that would become *Four Saints*. Thomson met Stein only by chance. As the composer recalls in his autobiography, Stein, “[h]aving heard in literary circles that George Antheil was that year’s genius […] thought she really ought to look him over,” and asked Antheil, the “bad boy of music,” to 27 rue de Fleurus. An “always game but wary” Antheil took the liberty of bringing along Thomson “for intellectual protection,” and an immediate friendship between Stein and Thomson was established (89). Thomson soon presented Stein with his musical setting of her poem, “Susie Asado,” which pleased her and, perhaps more importantly, received Alice’s approval.89 When Thomson asked Stein to write him an opera libretto, she readily agreed. The result, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, would prove to be the first of several operatic endeavors for Stein. After *Four Saints* Stein wrote two other libretti, one for Lord Gerald Berners, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938), and a second one for Thomson, *The Mother of Us All* (1946), neither of which Stein ever heard performed.90 In addition to these completed libretti are the two named “operas” from *Operas and Plays* (1932) that have no music attached to them, *A Lyrical Opera Made By Two: To Be Sung* (1928) and *Madame Recamier: An Opera* (1930), as well as *A Bouquet. Their Wills* (1928), which is not identified as an opera in its title, but which Dydo, citing Stein’s discussion of it in a letter to Thomson, contends

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89 As Thomson notes, it was Alice, not Gertrude, who “understood music” (*Virgil Thomson* 171).

90 *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, which was commissioned by composer Gerald Berners and conceived by Stein as a libretto, was never set by Berners, who wrote to Stein in December 1939: “all inspirational sources seem to have dried up: I can’t write a note of music or do any kind of creative work whatever and it’s not for want of trying and I don’t believe I shall be able to as long as this war lasts” (Gallup 346). Though Berners suggested giving the libretto to another composer, it was not transformed into an opera until seventeen years after Stein’s death, when American composer Meyer Kupferman, who had used a Stein text for his early one-act opera *In A Garden* (1948), set it.
“includes unmistakably operatic material” (*Language That Rises* 250). A Lyrical Opera Made By Two and Madame Recamier are significant in that they are both specifically identified as operas but unlike *Four Saints*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *Mother of Us All*, were not begun at the behest of a composer, and it is not clear if Stein imagined them eventually being set to music. It is worth noting, however, that Stein was generally receptive to her words being re-imagined in musical settings, whether it was Thomson’s several musical settings of her poems, or Lord Gerald Berners’ adaptation of her play, *They Must. Be Wedded. To Their Wife.* into a ballet that premiered at Sadler’s Wells 27 April 1937 with Stein in attendance, retitled *The Wedding Bouquet.*

In total, this makes three completed opera libretti and three literary “operas”—not perhaps a great percentage of text, given Stein’s voluminous output, but a fairly significant body of operatic works nonetheless. And yet critical discussions of Stein

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91 “In a letter to Virgil Thomson postmarked July 13, 1928, Stein speaks in some detail of the new opera; by August 28, she reports that she has finished it. She also later refers to the piece as her ‘Baltimore opera’” (Dydo, *Language That Rises* 250 n45).

92 Aside from the operas, Thomson set five of Stein’s works: *Susie Asado* (1926) for voice and piano, *Preciosilla* (1927) for voice and piano, *Capital Capitals* (1927) for four male voices and piano, *Portrait of F. B.* (1929) for voice and piano, and *Deux soeurs qui ne sont pas soeurs* (1930) for voice and piano (English translation by Donald Sutherland). He also wrote three tribute works for her: *Le Berceau de Gertrude Stein ou Le Mystère de la rue de Fleurus* (1928) for voice and piano (text by Georges Hugnet, English translation by Donald Sutherland), *Miss Gertrude Stein as a Young Girl: Portrait for Solo Violin* (1928), and *Piano Sonata No. 3 on White Keys for Gertrude Stein* (1930).

In *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Stein remarks that *Capital Capitals* “sings so well” (241), but it is for *A Wedding Bouquet* that she reserves her most effusive praise, writing: “I like hearing my words and I like it being a play and I liked it being something to look at and I liked their doing it again and I like the music going on. . . . I did like the ballet” (326; see also Stein and Van Vechten 2: 544). Incidentally, the title change was a matter of practicality: “the name of the play is They Must Be Wedded To Their Wife but as the title is too long for advertising we call it *A Wedding Bouquet*” (*EA* 229).

93 Thomson’s musical setting of *Capital Capitals* (1923) is often labeled an “opera” (see Hoffman 78), but the text was written as a play; like *They Must. Be Wedded. To Their Wife* (1931), the musical setting came long after its publication. It is true, as Bowers argues, that *Four Saints* too “was largely Thomson’s collaboration with the *fait accompli* of the Stein text,” but in the case of *Four Saints*, “the *fait accompli* was written as an opera libretto, not a play (“The Writer” 215).

The other notable Stein piece set to music is the puppet play *Identity* that she wrote for Donald Vestal, whom she met while walking in Chicago in 1935 (see Stein and Wilder 361-63). The “skillful and droll”
and opera are limited in both scope and number, tending either to be eclipsed by interpretations of the famous 1934 production of *Four Saints in Three Acts* or buried within a more general discussion of her playwriting aesthetic, even though at least one critic claims that “Stein’s major contributions to the drama are her ‘operas’ rather than her ‘plays’” (Hoffman 78). Though critics have analyzed the effect of Thomson’s music on Stein’s words and even how their collaboration in *Four Saints* challenged the generic boundaries of opera, no study to date has asked the questions underlying my discussion of *Four Saints in Three Acts*: Why was Stein motivated to write operas and opera libretti, particularly in the instances when she was not commissioned by composers to do so, and how does opera fit into her more general aesthetic program, particularly as it

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music composed for the play is described in a letter from Thornton Wilder to Stein and Toklas (25 June 1936; Stein and Wilder 103).

Before Stein and Thomson settled on *The Mother of Us All*, Stein considered several other collaborative projects with Thomson: “Then there is this, in going over the ms. I found a play, about Byron, I think it is completely possible to do with Virgil, who directly and indirectly wants it, it would take a lot of stage imagination to put it on, but it does move and it is a romantic tragedy, we will send it separate, I have not mentioned its xistence [sic] to anybody” (22 December 1935 Stein and Van Vechten 2:467-8). Stein also considers having Thomson set her play, *Daniel Webster*, to music: “I have a dream,” she writes, “of its being done in Hollywood, with Virgil [Thomson] or Gerald [Berners] or somebody to do the music not xactly [sic] an opera” (16 October 1937; Stein and Van Vechten 2:573; see also the 21 February 1938 letter from Stein to Van Vechten; 2: 591). Notably, Daniel Webster plays an important role in her last opera, *The Mother of Us All*.

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The 1934 production of *Four Saints in Three Acts* is an event that has been crystallized into a key modernist moment rich in interpretive possibilities; “its notoriety,” Thomson claimed in his autobiography, was “unparalleled since that of Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude*” (243). Echoing this sentiment, Van Vechten wrote: “I haven’t seen a crowd more excited since Sacre du Printemps” (8 February 1934; Stein and Van Vechten 1: 295). Stark Young’s review called it “the most important event of the theatre season . . . the first free, pure theatre that I have seen so far” (71). See Steven Watson’s *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* for a rich study of the making of the opera and David Harris’s “The Original *Four Saints in Three Acts*” for an in-depth description of the original production. Lisa Barg, Barbara Webb, and Leslie Atkins Durham all read the original production, which included an all-black cast, in terms of race. Barg argues that “the subversive aspects of the production’s racial spectacle were . . . severely compromised through the minstrelized framing of the performers” in which the all-black cast functioned as “ciphers for the opera’s avant-garde ‘nonsense’” (151). Webb’s similar argument “uncovers [in the 1934 production] a tension between a high modernist strategy that rejected linearity and history and a visible physical racial identity that was, by definition, the cumulative effect of historical cultural narrative(s)” (447), and Durham argues that the success of the 1934 production was dependent on primitivist racial stereotypes (35).
relates to her approach to theatre? Bucknell is correct to characterize Stein’s “early experience in listening to opera as merely a phase through which she passed on her way to a fuller knowledge of drama” (Literary Modernism 162); the question left unanswered by critics is how opera enabled the radical theatrical transformation embodied in her conception of landscape theatre.

There are many reasons for this gap in scholarship, including the routine conflation of her operas and plays, the characterization of her collaboration with Thomson as antagonistic, and the critical assumption that because her dramatic works are inherently “anti-theatrical,” the operas are little more than a generic joke. Stein was not a typical librettist. She did not adapt texts, as many librettists do, but wrote completely original compositions. She wrote some works that she called operas, as we have seen, but which have no musical texts. She published libretti before they had musical texts written for them. Though she occasionally consulted with the composers for whom she wrote her libretti, she did not “collaborate” in the usual sense: she made no attempts to make her libretti stageable; she took no creative role in the production of the works; and she allowed her composer-collaborator to cut and edit her libretti at will. Yet she insisted that the projects were equal partnerships, “collaborations.” When we look at Stein and opera, then, there are a number of issues that have to be resolved beyond the usual negotiations involved in studying opera in the context of literary studies.

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95 For a brief discussion of Four Saints in its historical and generic context, see chapter 23 of Patrick J. Smith’s The Tenth Muse. After hearing Thomson play and sing Four Saints in 1929, Van Vechten reported that Mabel Dodge Luhan “liked it so much that she said it should be done & it would finish opera just as Picasso had finished old painting” (Stein and Van Vechten 1: 191).
Chief among these issues is Stein’s seeming dismissal of opera and especially music, even in the face of her apparent delight in hearing her works set to music. As Stein ruefully admitted in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, “[a]s yet they have not yet done any [plays] of mine without music to help them. They could though and it would be interesting but no one has yet” (200). I do not want to suggest that Stein’s texts, operatic or not, “seek ways of becoming music” (Dalziell 112)—indeed, I will later refute positions that take her work to be word-music—but I do think her seeming ambivalence toward the musical arts needs to be more carefully examined.

Stein’s emergence as the most talked about librettist of the 1930s did not arise out of any particular attachment she might have felt toward the musical arts. Although Stein’s writing is often likened to music, she was not herself “musical.” Her salon was famous for its paintings, not its musical concerts; as Bucknell notes, “[i]f one knows little else about Stein, one is sure to have heard of her connection with Picasso, especially, if not with Matisse, Gris, Braque and others” (*Literary Modernism* 162). Although Stein

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96 Richard Howard claims “Stein was not happy” that her plays required music to work as theatre and “mistrusted the fact that her operas seemed to be successful only when they were performed with Virgil Thomson’s music” (Rosten et. al 13). The point requires some clarification. Nothing indicates that Stein was unhappy with *Four Saints*—the only opera “performed with Virgil Thomson’s music” in her lifetime—or, for that matter, that she was unhappy with the success of any of her works that were set to music. She was unhappy, however, that she could not get her other plays staged. A few months before her death, *Yes Is For a Very Young Man* was produced in Pasadena, California, her first play to be staged without the addition of a musical score (see McCaffrey 28).

97 In *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Stein several times makes this point abundantly clear, wryly noting: “Mike [her brother] thought I ought to be a musician, not that I was ever interested in music naturally not” (143), and later admitting that she and Leon Solomons, with whom she conducted experiments in automatic writing, initially thought “to do something connected with a tuning fork but as neither one of us had a very good ear for music that is for notes that was given up” (273). Her admirers, nevertheless, have consistently turned to music in praise of her art. “She has really turned language into music, really made its sound more important than its sense,” wrote Van Vechten (“How to Read Gertrude Stein” 34); “Stein has come closer than any other writer except Joyce to the medium of music,” concludes Leonard Bernstein.
seemed to appreciate having a piano in the home, she was by no means a pianist. As Thomson remembers, she had a “habit of playing on the white keys only, since she ‘did not like’ the black keys and could not read music anyway. Having no musical ‘ear,’ she was obliged to improvise if she played at all since there was not enough musical memory for her to play anything ‘by ear’” (Selected Letters 375). While she did invite into her circle a few select musicians—Erik Satie, George Antheil, Virgil Thomson, and later, Gerald Berners—they never provoked her intellectual curiosity in the same way in which visual artists did. Aside from Thomson, the only other “musical” friend of any sustained import to her writing career was her literary executor, the American writer, photographer, and music critic, Carl Van Vechten.

Stein was equally as ambivalent a music appreciator. Though in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas she admits that she was at one point so “engrossed” in opera that it prevented her from writing a university exam (though not from receiving “the highest mark in the course”), a few pages earlier she implies that her passion for music was but a passing phase:

Music she only cared for during her adolescence. She finds it difficult to listen to it, it does not hold her attention. All of which may seem strange because it has been so often said that the appeal of her work is to the ear and to the sub-

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98 Stein was unwilling to give up the piano at her rented home in Bilignin, claiming she liked “to improvise on a piano . . . to play sonatinas . . . always on the white keys I do not like black keys and never two notes struck by the same hand at the same time because I do not like chords” (EA 15). Later, she describes her improvisational technique in more detail, demonstrating, like Pound, a pronounced preference for horizontal music: “you never want to use anything but white keys black keys are too harmonious and you never want to do a chord chords are too emotional, you want to use white keys and play two hands together but not bother which direction either hand takes not at all you want to make it like a design and always looking and you will have a good time” (EA 236).

99 In Everybody’s Autobiography, she reveals that she spent all her money “going to the opera” and so could not pay her Latin tutor (EA 149).
conscious. Actually it is her eyes and mind that are active and important and concerned in choosing. (Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas 83)

Elaborating on this transition from music aficionado to detractor in “Plays,” she reasserts her claim that music is “adolescent”:

I became more interested in opera, I went one went and the whole business almost came together and then finally, just finally, I came not to care at all for music and so having concluded that music was made for adolescents and not for adults and having just left adolescence behind me and beside I knew all the operas anyway by that time I did not care any more for the opera. (LA 117)

In the next paragraph, however, she seems to retract her strong position:

Then I came to Paris to live there for a long time I did not go to the theatre at all. I forgot the theatre, I never thought about the theatre. I did sometimes think about the opera. I went to the opera once in Venice and I liked it and then much later Strauss’ Electra made me realize that in a kind of way there could be a solution of the problem of conversation on the stage. Beside it was a new opera and it is quite exciting to hear something unknown really unknown. (LA 117)

Taken together, the passages reveal a more complex response to music and opera than the highly quotable “music is for adolescents” comment would at first seem to indicate.

In the first passage, Stein seems to be reacting to the sense that music works on the subconscious, rather than conscious, mind, implying by the way in which she corrects how her work ought to be interpreted that music is capable of provoking only an emotional, sensual, or visceral response in its audience. She dislikes the comparison of her writing to music, the notion that “the appeal of her work is to the ear and to the sub-
conscious,” because it seems to discount the intellectual importance of her work, as the words she uses to describe her writing—“eyes,” “mind,” “active,” “important,” “concerned,” “choosing”—implies. Reading the passage in the context of Pater’s or Schopenhauer’s famous valorization of music, we might read in it a criticism not of music per se, but of a certain kind of music, or a certain understanding of music as an art form that transcends “sense” or replaces intellectual engagement. In her elaboration of this position in the second passage, she reveals that her bias against opera stems both from her over-saturation with the art form and from the sense that at some point, it offers nothing new: “beside I knew all the operas anyway by that time.” We cannot know just which operas Stein saw in this period, but it seems reasonable to assume that they were not modern operas, for when she encounters the “something unknown really unknown” Elektra, her position changes, and she comes to see in opera—or at least in opera as it was made new by Strauss and Hofmannsthal—a solution to a specific theatrical issue.

Plays and Operas

Jane Palatini Bowers notes that a failure to consider Stein’s plays generically risks missing the discoveries that Stein makes about the genre (They Watch Me 2). Curiously, however, Bowers does not apply this same logic to her discussion of Stein’s operas, which she, like so many critics, analyzes as plays. Finding no intrinsically operatic qualities in the texts Stein designated as operas that might differentiate them from her

100 “Gertrude Stein, in her work, had always been possessed by the intellectual passion for exactitude in the description of inner and outer reality. She has produced simplification by this concentration, and as a result the destruction of associational emotion in poetry and prose. She knows that beauty, music, decoration, the result of emotion should never be the cause, even events should never be the cause of emotion nor should they be the material of poetry or prose. They should consist of exact reproduction of either an outer or an inner reality” (Autobiography of Alice 228).
101 Stein mentions seeing Salome and Lohengrin in Chicago during her 1934-35 lecture tour, but this was long after the period to which these comments belong (EA 218).
plays, Bowers contends that the only “‘operas’ Stein wrote were not those plays she called operas, but those that were eventually scored for voices as either operas or musicals” (*They Watch Me* 43). In other words, *Stein* wrote no operas, but the composers who adapted her texts, did. Undoubtedly, the difficulty of reading Stein’s work generically contributes to this routine conflation of her dramatic works. Both Marianne DeKoven and Dydo make the important point that Stein’s work is better categorized chronologically than generically, in large part because Stein’s texts seem to deny us the generic characterizations that their titles promise (DeKoven xv). Though in Stein’s case, works of a given period do typically resemble and influence one another regardless of their ostensible genres, it is also true that regardless of how little a given text seems to make generic sense, Stein regularly announces in the titles of her works the genre to which they belong: as she writes in “Plays,” “I think and always have thought that if you write a play you ought to announce that it is a play and that is what I did” (*LA* 118).

Part of the tendency to disregard the generic specificity of Stein’s libretti and operas stems from Stein’s own propensity to use the words opera, play, and drama interchangeably. While Stein regularly used the word “play” for “opera” in her correspondence and writings, and in her lecture, “Plays,” discusses her opera, *Four Saints*, as emblematic of landscape theatre, it cannot be denied that Stein deliberately marked five of her theatrical works as operas, not plays.102 These works were written with the full knowledge of what an opera is (witness her experience at the opera) and, in at least three cases, with the full expectation that they would be transformed into operas

102 In the brief manuscript fragment labeled “Pathé,” Stein remarks: “Then I have written a lecture about PLAYS and of course that means operas too” (printed in Stein and Wilder 352).
by the addition of a musical text. Indeed, with *Four Saints* and *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, there is evidence that Stein specifically planned operatic material in the course of composing the libretti. If the operas are “really” misnamed plays, as some critics contend, there would have been no need to include both words in the titles of two of her collected theatre works, nor would she have made the distinction between opera and the theatre in her account of her gradual disillusionment with traditional drama in “Plays”: “[f]rom then on I was less and less interested in the theatre. I became more interested in opera . . .” (117). To conflate the two dramatic forms, or to disregard Stein’s precise generic categorizations as “generic overcompensation” (Puchner 106) does more than dismiss her art, as Wyndham Lewis and other critics of his era did, as “an abominable kind of sport” (Brinnin 122)—it actually obscures the source, aims and effect of landscape theatre.

**Stein as Collaborator**

As a result of this conflation of the operas and plays, critics have generally read Stein and Thomson’s relationship antagonistically, suggesting that Stein entered into the collaboration with trepidation and obliquely implying that Thomson’s score and Maurice Grosser’s scenario defeat the artistry of Stein’s text. Such a stance is not supported by Stein’s comments about Thomson, the opera, or its production; nor is it tenable given

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103 Dydo notes that in the course of writing *Four Saints*, Stein “plan[ned] passages for musical setting” (*Language That Rises* 174; see also Mellow 303-8), and she was “xcited [sic] as can be” about writing the operatic material for *Faustus*:

Ida has become an opera, and it is a beauty, really is, an opera about Faust, I am dying to show it to you, I have the first act done, and I am now working on the second one, an opera with arias and duets and quartets and quintets and solos and choruses Berners is going to do the music and I am xcited [sic] as can be, some day she will be a novel too, she is getting ready for that, but as an opera she is a wonder. (11 May 1938; Stein and Van Vechten 217-8)

When Berners requested changes to the second act, specifically, that the opera start off with an aria, Stein acquiesced (see Stein’s 5 October 1938 letter to Van Vechten, in which she encloses the aria for *Faust* that now opens the libretto; Stein and Van Vechten 2: 612).
Stein’s repeated return both to the genre and to the process of collaboration. As Brinnin notes, “she seemed to have recognized [Virgil Thomson’s] brilliance as a critic and his self-assurance as a composer from the very beginning of their relationship and to have accepted him as an equal” (278). Stein was not in any way in the “service” of the composers with whom she worked; she did not adapt or “compress” source texts into libretti, but wrote original literary pieces designed to be completed by musical scores.

Ironically, a brief recounting of the quarrel between Stein and Thomson over the division of royalties for *Four Saints in Three Acts* helps to dispel the notion that Stein was a reluctant librettist and collaborator. Early in 1933, Stein inquired through her literary agent, William Bradley, about the upcoming premiere of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, which was to be given at the recently constructed theatre in the Avery Wing of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, sponsored in part by the Friends and Enemies of Modern Music. On account of a quarrel between Stein and the French poet Georges Hugnet, in which Thomson had found himself caught in the middle

104 Dydo points to the repeated use of the phrase “in union there is strength” in the last part of “Regular Regularly in Narrative,” the work that directly precedes *Four Saints*, to suggest that Stein was “uneasy about collaboration, about doing an opera, about moving from the unfinished study of narrative to plays” (*Language That Rises* 175-6). It is worth noting, however, that the completion of the project seems to have piqued, not dissipated, Stein’s interest in collaboration. Besides the two subsequent operatic projects that she embarked on with Berners and Thomson, respectively, she also considered literary collaborations with a number of other writers, though the projects never panned out:

> I always wanted to collaborate with some one I wanted to collaborate with Sherwood Anderson in a history of Grant I wanted to collaborate with Louis Bromfield in a detective story and now I want to collaborate with Lloyd Lewis in a history of Grant. They are all very polite and enthusiastic about it but the collaboration does never take place. I suppose I like the word collaboration and I have a kind of imagination of how it would take place. (*EA* 278)

Though Michael J. Hoffman asserts that “Stein obviously had trouble collaborating [with Thomson on *Four Saints*]” (80), the repetition of the word collaborate in the passage above suggests an acute interest in, even fixation on, the idea of collaboration—though it may also reflect her pleasure with what was at that time a relatively new word: the OED dates the first use of the verb as 1871. Possible collaborators were not limited to authors or musicians: Mellow notes that Stein hoped Francis Picabia might collaborate as scenic designer on her 1936 play, *Listen to Me* (428-9) and Stein was responsive to Henry Dunham’s proposal to adapt Grosser’s scenarios of her plays for film, though the project never panned out (see Stein and Van Vechten 2:483-4).
and therefore temporarily ousted from Stein’s circle, Stein did not directly write to Thomson about her “reserves about the opera-mounting,” but Thomson did address his reply directly to her. In the letter, Thomson asks Stein to reconsider his initial offer of a 50-50 division of all profits, which he had made, as he writes, against “the usual practise,” “in view of the closeness of our collaboration and of the importance given to the text in my score” (30 May 1933; qtd. in Virgil Thomson 229). In his defense, he quotes the guidelines of the Société des Droits d’Auteurs, which recommended a two-thirds-one-third composer/author split, based on the following two points:

1) because the manual labour involved in musical composition is so much greater than that of writing words that half the proceeds is an insufficient return for the composer, considering him as a joint worker.

2) because a literary work is perfectly saleable separate from the music and thus brings further profit to its author, whereas the music is rarely saleable in any way separated from the text it was designed to accompany. (qtd. in Virgil Thomson 230)

In her response, Stein declines to renegotiate the original terms, claiming “the commercial value” of her name is “very considerable,” leading Thomson to protest, “although your name has a very great publicity value as representing the highest quality of artistic achievement, its purely commercial value, especially in connection with a work as hermetic in style as the *Four Saints*, is somewhat less, as I have found in seeking a

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105 For a complete account of this quarrel, see chapter 16 of Virgil Thomson’s autobiography.

106 John Cage’s assessment of the respective parts of *Four Saints* lends credence to Thomson’s point. “The text,” he notes, “may be read alone . . . . Divorced from it, the music would surely lose something of its strength” (Hoover and Cage 157-8).
publisher for our various joint works,” before expounding on the tremendous financial difficulties he has encountered in the mounting of the opera, eventually concluding that their 50-50 arrangement is, to his knowledge, “absolutely without precedent” (9 June 1933; qtd. in Virgil Thomson 231-232).

Once again, Stein is unmoved by Thomson’s pleas, arguing that their respective contributions to the project were equal:

Yes yes yes, but nous avons change tout cela [referring to her recent success with The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas], however the important thing is this, the opera was a collaboration, and the proposition made to me in the agreement was in the spirit of that collaboration, 50-50, and the proposition that I accepted was in the spirit of that collaboration 50-50 and the proposition that I continue to accept is the same. When in the future you write operas and have texts from various writers it will be as you and the precedents arrange, but our opera was a collaboration, we own it together and we divide the proceeds 50-50, and we hope that the proceeds will be abundant and we wish each other every possible good luck. (11 June 1933; qtd. in Virgil Thomson 233)

The sheer number of times that Stein uses the word collaboration in this short letter indicates her conviction that her role, in spite of her lack of involvement with the actual mounting of the opera, was as integral to the work’s eventual production as was Thomson’s. It goes without saying that when money is involved, such pronouncements are not easily taken at face value, but it is worth noting that even according to Thomson’s recounting of the composition and production of Four Saints, it is clear that Stein’s
libretto dictated every aspect of the score and the opera’s production. Stein and Thomson worked out the initial scenario of the opera together: Thomson suggested as a theme “the working artist’s working life” and recommended that the opera “follow overtly . . . the format of classical Italian opera” and they together agreed that the subjects should be saints and the setting Baroque and Spanish (*Virgil Thomson* 90-1). From there, Stein had free rein, and completed the libretto without additional input from Thomson.

When Thomson came to write the music, however, Stein’s text figured prominently. Thomson describes the compositional process as being different than his usual practice, in which he would work away from the piano:

> With the text on my piano’s music rack, I would sing and play, improvising melody to fit the words and harmony for underpinning them with shape. I did this every day, wrote down nothing. When the first act would improvise itself everyday in the same way, I knew it was set. (*Virgil Thomson* 104)

Here, the piano is essential to the process because it is through improvisation that Thomson intuits the music that the text requires. Deviating from modern approaches to the composition of opera, Thomson’s style of setting word-groups is “more like Renaissance setting where the music seems to follow the language which makes the

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107 It is also worth noting the strength of Stein’s formidable personality. One critic goes so far to liken Stein to “the classic operatic diva” in the way in which she related to the “supplicants,” like Thomson, who “orbited” around her (Will 650).

108 As Thomson indicated in an interview in 1972, he and Stein did not “collaborate” in the traditional sense: “She didn’t work with me, and I didn’t work with her. We agreed on what we were going to make it about and then she had to do her work and then I had to do mine. It was not a constant adjustment in terms of theatrical production, as libretto and opera writing often is” (qtd. in Ryan 34). Stein also had little to do with the actual production other than receiving Thomson’s regular progress reports (see, for instance, the 30 May 1933, 22 June 1933, and 6 December 1933 letters from Thomson to Stein in Thomson, *Selected Letters* 105-7, 109-10, 112-3).
rhythmic concerns of the music follow suit” (Bucknell, Literary Modernism 184).

Indeed, Thomson almost completely removes his own creative agency from the compositional process (“when the first act would improvise itself”), consistently maintaining that it was Stein’s words that “gave [the] work so special a vitality . . . the music having been created in their image” (Virgil Thomson 105). While it is undoubtedly true that all composers take inspiration from the words supplied by their librettists, Thomson’s approach, which practically deifies the words (“music having been created in their image”), takes the convention a step further, transferring the ultimate ownership of the work from the composer to the librettist, and lends some justification to Stein’s precedent-reversing stance on the division of profits. As Albright remarks, Four Saints “is a portrait, not of a human being, but of a text” (“An Opera with No Acts” 592).

Stein’s insistence that the Four Saints collaboration was 50/50 certainly indicates the seriousness with which she approached her role in the composition of the opera. But it also demonstrates, on the flip side, her awareness that she was producing a text that was incomplete until it was scored—her contribution was at least, but only ever, half. Thus the eventual music written by Thomson, her agreed-upon collaborator, should not be regarded as an intrusion into Four Saints, an unwelcome stage adaptation of her literary play, but as the necessary completion of the text, which was always designed to work with a musical score. In opera, the composition of the musical score typically follows the composition of the libretto. Especially for a librettist, then, opera, as an allographic text,

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109 Indeed, the creative power was so balanced in Stein’s favor that Thomson felt he had to ask her permission to make cuts to the score even when the cuts were only for the initial production of the opera, and would not appear in the copyrighted score (see Thomson’s 5 June 1933 letter to Stein and her 25 June 1933 response in Virgil Thomson 234).
is subject to artistic incursions first from the collaborating composer, and then each time
the opera is performed (113-15). So in spite of the fact that she twice published the
libretto separate from its score before the opera premiered in 1934, *Four Saints* cannot be
considered autonomous in the same way in which her other literary texts are. Stein
recognized and accepted that her text would be notational in this sense, and though
literary critics have taken issue with the ways in which the completed opera alters or
“fixes” Stein’s amorphous words, preferring to study Stein’s *Four Saints* as an
autonomous literary work rather than as a libretto, it is worthwhile to note that Stein
herself never indicated displeasure with the music Thomson wrote or the scenario
Grosser devised.

The assumption, argued by many critics, that Stein’s artistic vision was at cross-
purposes with both Thomson’s score and the very notion of collaboration reveals more

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110 Stein first published *Four Saints* in *transition* in 1929 before anthologizing it in *Operas and Plays* in
1932. Thomson completed the score in 1928. Dydo points to Stein’s publishing of *Four Saints in Three
Acts in transition* as justification for her examination of *Four Saints* “as a 1927 literary work” (Language
That Rises 173). I have no issue with looking at the text apart from its musical and dramatic
accompaniments—my own analysis, which originates in an interest in Stein’s motives for writing opera,
will also focus on her text, not Thomson’s score or Grosser’s scenario. But I do think there is a problem
analyzing the work without awareness of and attention to its generic specificity.

111 As Thomson noted in a letter to Bradley, again over the division of profits, the importance of Grosser’s
scenario to the initial production of *Four Saints* cannot be underestimated: “Maurice Grosser’s scenario . . .
rendered possible the putting of the opera on the stage . . . . Gertrude’s stage directions (beautiful and
suggestive as they are) are in no way sufficient to the staging of her libretto” (6 March 1934; Gertrude Stein
and Alice B. Toklas Papers). However, neither can the scenario be counted or claimed as a part of the
Thomson/Stein collaboration. As Thomson suggested and Stein agreed, Grosser’s notes, which Stein
called “Maurice’s suggestions” (qtd. in Virgil Thomson 235), were not to be included in the copyrighted
work, since as Thomson noted in a letter to Stein, “they are neither your nor my invention and though they
will be used in the production are not the only ones that are possible” (22 June 1933; qtd. in Virgil Thomson
233). In the published score, Grosser’s scenario is included, but it is clearly indicated that it is of his, not
Stein’s or Thomson’s, invention. Several critics have suggested that the prominence of Grosser’s scenario
has done a disservice to Stein’s libretto, essentially misinterpreting her text. Bowers finds that “[t]he
Thomson arrangement and the Maurice Grosser production obscured the purpose and the meaning of the
libretto by disguising the authorial voice and by ignoring the improvisational illusion which Stein created”
(“The Writer in the Theater” 222). Meg Albrinck argues that “the narrative framework of the Grosser
scenario reduces the fluidity and free play of the original libretto, and in doing so, discounts the powerful
female vision of the 1927 version” (1); further, it “deliberately repressed or transformed” “suggestions of
homosexuality” (10-11).
about “the bias that often accompanies academic specialization” than about the making of *Four Saints in Three Acts* (Blackmer 343). Such an assumption suggests an artistic divide that discounts Stein’s *choice* to collaborate with Thomson and implies that she entered into the project unaware of both Thomson’s musical style and the nature of operatic collaboration, when in fact she “developed great respect for Thomson’s musical judgments” (Mellow 302). Indeed, as Bucknell notes, “the score is a kind of inscription of the first and perhaps the text’s ideal reader, a reader responding (if not ‘talking’) at the same time as he is reading Stein’s language landscape” (*Literary Modernism* 181). As with the reading of plays, in which the eventual transformation of the play into theatre contextualizes our approach to the text, so too should the eventual transformation of Stein’s libretti into opera inform our approach to the text.

**Stein’s Anti-Theatricalist Theatricalism**

When Stein embarked on her first operatic project, she knew she was producing a work that would be incomplete until it was both set to music and produced, since operas, unlike plays, aren’t “read.” Indeed, even with her plays, which admittedly are difficult to imagine actually staged, Stein repeatedly resisted the idea that they were merely closet dramas, insisting that she always meant for them to be performed. It is true that Stein’s involvement in the actual production of *Four Saints* was limited to her belated attendance

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112 Based on the length of time it took Stein to write *Four Saints*, Bowers concludes that “Stein was uncomfortable with the prospect of writing an opera libretto” and that “Thomson’s expectations seem to have inhibited Stein” (“The Writer” 214, 215). Bridgman calls *Four Saints* an “uncongenial commission” (183), arguing that in the protracted opening Stein was “trying to grasp the essence of her historical figure, but finding the task troublesome” (179). Albrinck extends their arguments, suggesting that Stein was “uncertain that her text should be staged at all” because it “imposed an interpretation” on the work (6). For Dydo, Stein’s words, attached to Thomson’s music, “are no longer free to move as words, for the musical setting nails the words down in the score, which gives them continuity but removes their fluidity” (*Language That Rises* 202).
at one of the performances, and it is also true that her plays and operas need “help” in order to work as theatre. But to make Puchner’s argument, that Four Saints harbors an inherent anti-theatricalism borne of the high modernist “obsessive scorn for the ‘masses,’” obfuscates Stein’s complex approach to the theatre and simplifies modernism’s multivalent response to mass culture (103).

Though the “anti-theatrical” tensions that Puchner identifies in Four Saints are real—particularly Stein’s attempted erasure of the human actor (though not, as I will note, the human voice)—they are a result of Stein’s attempt to defeat the patriarchal imperative in narrative, rather than an attempt to defeat theatre itself. Without a question, Stein’s reformation of a narrative-obsessed theatre recalls Michael Fried’s conclusion in “Art and Objecthood” upon which Puchner’s argument draws: “faced with the need to defeat theatre, it is above all to the condition of painting and sculpture—the condition, that is, of existing in, indeed of secreting or constituting, a continuous and perpetual

113 As James Mellow elaborates, Stein’s insistence on this point led to the “[f]irst serious rift” in Stein and Mabel Dodge [Luhan]’s friendship: “When Mabel suggested publishing [the plays] without waiting for production, Gertrude’s tone became peremptory: ‘No decidedly not,’ she wrote Mabel. ‘I do not want the plays published. They are to be kept to be played’” (175-6). The poet Donald Evans met with a similar reaction when he asked to publish a volume of her early plays (Stein ended up sending him Tender Buttons; see Gallup 95-6). Stein, however, abdicated all production decisions to Thomson. When Four Saints was in the early production stages, she told her collaborator that “the burden of making it a successful performance lies upon you,” before expressing her gratitude for Grosser’s “help” (25 June 1933; qtd. in Virgil Thomson 234); moreover, after seeing Four Saints in Three Acts for the first time, she commented, “I think it was perfectly extraordinary how they carried out what I wanted” (qtd. in Brinnin 346). In her later reminiscence of the scenarist, she remarked, “[Grosser] had a way of knowing how it was possible to play the plays that I have written” (EA 77). Indeed, when Stein laments that none of her plays had been given without music to help them, she names Grosser as the person who might successfully mount one: “I always had a feeling that Maurice Grosser might but then he wants to be a painter and that is a pity and besides anyway probably nobody would let him” (EA 200). Thomson was indeed responsible for getting Four Saints staged, but that should not be interpreted as evidence that Stein was ambivalent about the opera’s production. Though her efforts were futile (and by no means matched Thomson’s), Stein discussed the possibility of Paris and London productions of the opera with Berners, and “wrote to a number of people enlisting support” (Stein and Wilder 101 n1; see Stein and Van Vechten 2:482). Thomson writes, “Gertrude Stein, at the same time, was trying to move everybody she could for my sake and for the sake of our opera” (Virgil Thomson 163).
present—that the other contemporary modernist arts, most notably poetry and music, aspire” (146). Yet it must be remembered that Stein’s argument in “Plays” stems from her practical experience as an audience member and spectator, not her professional experience as an author or even a playwright: she does not want to defeat theatre, to eliminate the gap between subjecthood and objecthood, but to change the power structure of that relationship. (Moreover, the landscape model, as we will see, should not be equated uncritically with the visual arts; landscape theatre does not mean visual theatre.) She sees in the many generic “limitations” of opera a way to challenge the way we think about the theatre ultimately to invest the audience with the ability to construct meaning in each moment of the work’s production (see Bay-Cheng 48). Indeed, the performative aspect of her operas and plays—their “envoicing”—is central to her prioritization of the continuous present and linked expressly to the anti-patriarchal imperative evident in the works.

Of course, as Puchner explains in his introduction, any form of anti-theatricalism “feed[s] off the theatre”—“the resistance registered in the prefix anti . . . does not describe a place outside the horizon of the theatre” (2). And as is made clear in the nuanced reading of anti-theatricality advanced in the essays by Lindenberger and Elinor Fuchs in Puchner and Alan Ackerman’s edited collection Against Theatre: Creative Destruc
tions on the Modernist Stage: “anti-theatricalism can be thought of as a subset of what Lionel Abel called ‘metatheatre,’ the critical version of the theatre’s tendency towards self-commentary and self-reflection” (Ackerman and Puchner 15). Casting the anti-theatrical tensions in Four Saints as metatheatrical rather than anti-theatrical is, in Stein’s case, more productive not only because it takes into account the marvelous
theatrical success of *Four Saints*, the first of Stein’s dramatic texts that proved stageable even though, as Puchner admits, Stein presented Thomson “with a seemingly unstageable text” (Bay-Cheng 54, 50; see Puchner 101), but also because it allows us to reconcile the seeming impossibility of presenting Stein’s theatrical works as theatre with her adamant stance that they were intended *only* for the theatre. Though Stein admits in “Plays” that “very often one does read a play” (109), she does not base her argument or her plays and operas on “the high modernist values of engulfment and solitary reading” (Puchner 103), though the literary practice of reading informs her challenge to the theatre—rather, her works appeal directly to the community of authors present in every live audience.

Though Stein does not structure her argument in “Plays” in terms of a literary/theatre binary, the impasse between the literary and the theatrical elements in her plays forms the locus of most arguments that take up Stein’s theatre. At one end of the spectrum is the position that Stein “equated plays with their embodiment on the stage, believing that their sheer physicality outweighed any other considerations” (Ryan 37). At the other end of the spectrum it is argued that “Stein’s plays *oppose* the physicality of performance. Stein’s is a theater of language: her plays are adamantly and self-consciously ‘literary’” (Bowers, *They Watch Me* 2, my italics); though Stein’s operas “take music and staging well,” they “are first of all *literary* works embodying the

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114 Perhaps most indicative of the wild success of the performance was the extent to which the opera was incorporated into popular, material, and even political culture:

Bergdorf Goodman offered a tea gown in five colors, called ‘Saint’ because ‘it looks like one of the thrilling costumes in the much-talked-of Four Saints opera; Gimbel’s featured modernistic, geometrically patterned tablecloths named after lines from the opera, and John Wanamaker promoted $16.95 cellophane and rayon ready-to-wear evening wear (“Four Wraps in Cellophane”) with matching handbags for an extra $3.95. Decorated for Easter Sunday, the most prestigious windows along Fifth avenue evoked Florine’s sets: Elizabeth Arden showed Saint Teresa with an Easter egg, Bergdorf Goodman depicted Saint Teresa singing “April Fools Day a pleasure,” and Lord & Taylor and others followed suit. There were even rumors that the Republican Party would incorporate bits of the opera into its next party platform. (Watson 286)
essential qualities of opera . . . as her plays are literary works embodying the essence of stage plays” (Sutherland 107, my emphasis). None of these critics are completely correct—at least as far as Stein’s operas are concerned; as we will see, the double focus on language and its physical envoicing in *Four Saints in Three Acts* in fact appropriates operatic conventions in order to transgress the theatre/literature binary, making the literary, theatrical and the theatrical, literary.

**Opera as Landscape**

Sarah Bay-Cheng calls *Four Saints* a “transitional” work in Stein’s oeuvre, noting that it “represents a shift in Stein’s thinking about theater from the abstraction of idea to the physical embodiment of performance” (53, 55). The decision to collaborate with Thomson on *Four Saints in Three Acts* certainly was “a new departure” for Stein (Dydo, *Language That Rises* 171), which probably accounts for the uneasiness about the project that critics identify (Dydo, *Language That Rises* 175; Bowers, “Writer in Theater” 215). But as the first piece of what Stein would later call landscape theatre, *Four Saints* also represented the solution to a number of theoretical and dramatic concerns that had preoccupied Stein throughout her writing career. While Stein’s early theatre works are, like the pieces collected in *Operas and Plays*, concerned with conveying the “essence of what happened” without telling stories (119, 121-2), they do not solve the problem of “syncopation” in the theatre, which Stein explains as the feeling that “your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play” (*LA*
What Stein negatively identifies as “syncopation” is described by narratologists as “rhythm,” the discrepancy between “fabula-time” (the time covered in the fiction) and “story-time” (the temporal space of the narration of these events) (see Bal 101-2). As Mieke Bal notes, “narrative rhythm . . . remain[s] the most elusive aspect” in texts that are read because the “time of telling” varies with each reading and reader—it cannot be calculated (100). Though this time of telling varies also with each theatrical performance, the main difference is that for the theatrical audience, this time is fixed for them. And it is this inflexibility between the “rhythm” of “story-time” and “fabula-time” in the theatre that is emotionally disruptive to Stein. Stein does not attempt to alter the fixedness of story-time in the theatre, but as I propose in the conclusion of this chapter, she does make the audience feel as though they were able to participate in the “authoring” of the play by restricting the prominence of narrative (fabula-time) and re-imagining language in non-functional terms. *Four Saints*, which Stein describes in “Plays” as the work that “did almost what I wanted, it made a landscape and the movement in it was like a movement in and out with which anybody looking on can keep time” (*LA* 131), begins the string of landscape operas and plays that eliminate this “difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play” (*LA* 122).

It is from Stein’s proclivity “to constantly think about the theatre from the standpoint of *sight and sound* and its relation to emotion and time, rather than in relation to story and action” that landscape theatre is borne (my italics, *LA* 104). For Stein, “[t]he thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is more

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115 Such was Stein’s ennui with primacy of narrative in the theatre that she declared of her early plays: “I concluded that anything that was not a story could be a play and I even made plays in letters and advertisements” (*LA* 119).
often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the
emotion of anybody in the audience” (LA 93). This problem, which she elsewhere refers
to as “the nervousness of the emotion at the theatre” (LA 103) or the need for the
audience to “make acquaintance” with the action on stage (LA 122) is intimately related
to a number of Steinian preoccupations—her problems with story-telling; her tendency to
avoid authoritative statements and to embrace ambiguity; her conviction that “[t]he
business of Art . . . is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and
to completely express that complete actual present” (LA 104). For clarity’s sake, I shall
try to discuss each of these concepts in relation to the question “why opera?” discretely,
but it should be stated straightaway that these concerns consistently overlap and derive
from the same artistic imperative: to encourage but not demand a participatory, envoiced
theatrical experience.

For Stein, conceptualizing theatre as landscape solves the problem of syncopation
in the theatre in large part because landscape is an artistic construct that exists outside of
narrative time. Importantly, however, this does not mean that landscape theatre is a-
temporal; it does not arrest time in the same way that, for instance, landscape paintings
do. It is true that in their resistance to story and action, Stein’s plays, as Bowers argues,
“oppose the normal . . . course of the theater event” (“The Composition” 132). But this
should not be confused or conflated with the a-temporal work of a landscape or landscape
painting, as Bowers’s next point suggests: “Instead of moving with the actor and the

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It may seem odd to speak of drama in terms of “narrative” time; though plays and operas can include
narrated portions (Wotan’s narration in Act II of Die Walküre is a classic example), narrative usually refers
to the telling of a story, not its dramatic enactment. As we shall see, however, the pairing is Stein’s; Four
Saints is a dramatic work intimately tied, thematically and formally, to the problems of narrative, as are her
later operas, Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights and The Mother of Us All.
action, her plays oppose them and create a kind of verbal stasis within theater time, much as a landscape painting extracts a moment from time’s flow and freezes it in a visual space or as a “natural” landscape interferes with the processes of nature” (“The Composition” 132). Indeed, landscape theatre, as Stein writes of Four Saints, “moves but it also stays” (LA 131). Thus Four Saints is not characterized by “stasis,” directed by the desire to “[work] against the natural energy and musical momentum of her prose,” as Bowers contends, but by the subversion of narrative so as to eliminate the need for the audience to “make acquaintance” with the action on stage (Bowers, “The Writer” 219, 220). Her libretto may not move forward in the usual sense, but it does move. Four Saints, as Robert Zamsky notes, “does not extinguish temporality, it obsesses about it” (726). Indeed, the directions to repeat acts and the repeated scenes themselves (there are nine distinct Scene Vs) do not stop time but call our attention to the passage of time, since each “repetition” brings us back to the moment of its original iteration.

At the same time, the repeated acts attempt to produce a feeling of simultaneity, of seeing the whole at every moment, like a landscape, rather than building up that whole sequentially through progression as in narrative:

To Stein, the trouble with plays is that they are apprehended piecemeal . . . . Landscapes, on the other hand, are essences, complete at every moment because they are altogether before us in every detail; to Stein, we apprehend them, unlike most plays, in their totality . . . . The painterly term “landscape” describes a play that aspires to the condition of landscape—total theater, complete, present to eye and ear, moving at every moment, defeating time and memory. (Dydo, Language That Rises 265)
But as the many counting passages in *Four Saints* reminds us, landscape theatre cannot extinguish temporality: the movement, rather, is like the experience of music, in which the inevitable forward “horizontal” movement of the given sequence of musical notes is in constant tension with music’s cyclic and “vertical” elements. Think, for instance, of the “circle of fifths” upon which traditional harmony is based; the simultaneity of chords and contrapuntal music; the many ritornello musical forms that invoke circularity as strongly as they invoke progression (sonata-allegro; rondo; minuet or scherzo and trio; da capo aria, theme and variations, etc.). In such forms, as Albright writes, “a certain stasis, a sense of going nowhere, may result from the fact that sections A. B. C. don’t seem to alter or impinge on one another; they simply happen” (*Modernism and Music* 68). Though music, like the literary and dramatic arts, is defined by its movement through time, a performance practice that valorizes the ideal of improvisation and artistic spontaneity (the nineteenth-century free-form “Impromptu” is one of many examples) often works to give the effect that meaning in music is not perpetually deferred but acquired whole in each moment of its production.

To be clear, I am talking about an effect, not an actuality. While the constant return to the tonic in traditional harmony, for instance, seems to defeat progression, the very notion of harmonic tension and resolution (famously exploited by Wagner with the belated resolution of the “Tristan chord”) makes temporal progression an integral part of music: in tonal music, a dominant chord only makes cadential “sense” when the tonic chord is sounded after. The twentieth-century move away from harmonic functionality in the so-called eye music of a composer like Debussy, where chords are arranged according to their intrinsic sound rather than their harmonic functionality, however, works against
such progression. Adorno puts it this way: “[t]he ear must be re-educated if it is to understand Debussy correctly, seeking not a process of obstruction and release, but perceiving a juxtaposition of colors and surfaces such as are to be found in a painting” (Philosophy 188). What I am trying to identify is the way in which movement in music is often accompanied by a tension between forward progression and the stasis of complete presentness.

As Stein describes the paradoxical effect in “Plays”: “A landscape does not move nothing really moves in a landscape but things are there” (129). These things—the magpies and scarecrows that Stein uses to explain the point, for instance—“may tell their story if they and if you like or even if I like but stories are only stories but that they [the magpies at Avila] stay in the air is not a story but a landscape” (129-30). Landscape theatre does not exclude the possibility of stories, but its primary purpose is to convey the relation of the things that compose it: “the story is only of importance if you like to tell or like to hear a story but the relation is there anyway” (LA 125). In other words, landscape theatre does not preclude temporal movement or even narrative, but neither is it dictated by action and narration. As Stein notes, “[a]ll these things [the ideas and scenes in Four Saints] might have been a story but as a landscape they were just there and a play is just there” (LA 131). The progression of events can make a story, but does not have to: there is a difference between a narrative and the presentation, even progression or “continuous
movement" of things or ideas (LA 131). Four Saints is not the story of four (or more) saints, but rather, is a theatre piece composed of saints.117

Elektra as Landscape?

As noted in the introductory chapter, in Stein’s most direct comment about the influence of opera on her playwriting methodology, she acknowledges her debt to Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s 1909 opera, *Elektra*. As a writer herself, Stein was likely impressed by Hofmannsthal’s remarkable libretto, but notably here she explicitly identifies the opera by its composer, not its librettist, suggesting that her praise derives from the musical aspect of the opera.118 Though operas, even the psychological monodrama *Elektra*, are typically presented as dramatic narratives, the accompanying music can help to ameliorate the nervousness that Stein felt results from the double temporality of the action on stage and its reception by the audience. To paraphrase Stein, in opera, your emotion as a member of the audience *is* going on at the same time as the action of the play not only because the “action of the play” is so often subverted by operatic conventions, but also because the music that accompanies it “makes acquaintance” for the audience member.

Sonically present everywhere, music literally bridges the dividing line of the curtain that Stein describes in “Plays”: “In the first place at the theatre there is the curtain and the curtain already makes one feel that one is not going to have the same tempo as

117 “In Four Saints I made the Saints the landscape. All the saints that I made and I made a number of them because after all a great many pieces of things are in a landscape all these saints together made my landscape” (LA 128-29).
118 In his historical study of the libretto, Smith singles out Hofmannsthal as the figure that “rises above the other librettists” of the twentieth century (362), noting: “Hofmannsthal’s verse, in its fluidity, approaches a melismatic prose, and although he could constrain it to stricter meter and rhyme, he preferred to let it flow freely, accenting the verse qualities by repetition, assonance, and light word-play” (371).
the thing that is there behind the curtain and what is on the other side of the curtain are not going to be going on together. One will always be behind or in front of the other” (LA 95). In opera, music is the emotional backdrop that works on the subconscious, as well as the conscious, mind. Though music can act as a “narrator” of sorts in opera, and though some types of music (program music, film music) are functional in that they are designed explicitly to support a narrative, music itself is not narratologically based in the same sense that language is: all of these conceptions of music as narrative rely upon an original linguistic source text or script, which the music is then thought to depict or contradict. Though we undoubtedly become more familiar with musical motifs and themes and their structural relationships in a musical text as it progresses, music is not typically burdened with the same sense of narrative functionality that language is.¹¹⁹ For this reason, it exists more easily in the same “actual present” in which the audience exists. As Jeffrey McCaffrey puts it, in music, “the continuous present” is “accomplished by the constant annexation of new notes to come, by there constantly being appropriate notes handy to uphold the sense of a faultlessly on-going present, until the piece reaches an artistic completion” (McCaffrey 29). Or as Stein wrote of hearing A Wedding Bouquet for the first time: “it [music] made [the words] do as if the last word had heard the next word and the next word had heard not the last word but the next word” (EA 327). Stein’s remark neatly illustrates not just music’s presentness, but also the way in which the

¹¹⁹ Leitmotifs are an obvious exception to this rule, since they rely on the audience’s capacity to remember their sound and recall their “meaning” and thereby contribute to the process of familiarization Stein identifies as problematic in staged narratives. However, they also work as music; that is, within the score itself they do not function as linguistic referents but as musical themes. For a balanced overview of the debate “about whether music could be narrative rather than just use narrativity as a kind of metaphor,” see Linda and Michael Hutcheon’s “Narrativizing the End: Death and Opera” (441). Abbate takes up these issues in relation to both music and opera throughout Unsung Voices.
tension between its horizontal and vertical elements can give the effect of movement that is not teleologically driven. In Thomson’s formulation, this movement is a “forward thrust” not connected to meaning but to rhythm: the contrast of the tension and release of lengths and stresses, the energy from which “makes music sail, take flight, get off the ground” (Virgil Thomson 105).

It would be tempting to interpret Stein’s enthusiasm for Elektra as praise for the singular role that music plays in opera, but clearly there was something unique about the “unknown really unknown” Elektra that causes her to single it out from all the other operas she knew, as another much earlier comment about Elektra in a 1913 letter to Mabel Dodge [Luhan] makes clear: “It [Elektra] made a deeper impression on me than anything since Tristan in my youth. He has done what Wagner tried to do and couldn’t he has made real conversation. And he does it by intervals and relations directly without machinery. After all we are all modern” (qtd. in Bowers, They Watch Me 40). Though the important role that the orchestra plays in Elektra (“sounding” Agamemnon’s name in the opening bars, for instance) obviously factors into her praise, it cannot account for it entirely, as music plays an important role in many if not all of the operas that Stein would have known, especially Wagner’s operas. The repeated mention of the possibility of “conversation” on the stage and the enigmatic “After all we are all modern” suggests that Stein saw in Elektra a precursor to her own landscape theatre. Stein never elaborates on what she means by “conversation” on stage, but it seems clear that her idea of “real conversation” is of a piece with her expressed dislike of the way in which the narrative impetus in drama removes the audience from the immediacy of the action. Such a
reading would seem to be supported by her curious invocation of Wagner, whose notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* worked to drown out the emotional syncopation Stein describes.

What immediately separates *Elektra* from the Wagnerian tradition, particularly the tragic love story *Tristan und Isolde*, is its move away from the epic narrative, masterfully exemplified in its compression into one act and one scene. For Patrick Smith, the development of the one-act form is central to the anti-Wagnerian strain in twentieth-century opera, as is the “internalization of the libretto,” a practice that leads eventually to psychological monodrama, of which Elektra might be said to be an early example. Curiously, his description of this form as the “simplification of the story and the characters” and an “emphasis on what could be called ‘snapshot scenes’” sounds very much like Stein’s description of landscape theatre (386). And Stein would of course consciously play with the narrative expectations engendered by multiple acts in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, which includes “three first acts, two second acts, two third acts, and one fourth act” (Bowers, “The Writer” 218), and obsesses throughout over the question of “how many acts are there in it.”

Stein’s libretto moves in circles, backward and forward, like a dance, challenging in a different way than does *Elektra* the synonymy of temporality and progression. Though we do wait, with Elektra, for Orest to avenge their father’s death, after which Elektra dances herself to death, the action in the opera is not characterized by progression, but rather is an examination of the relentlessly stagnant “continuous present” of Elektra’s psychological state. Though Elektra seems to be motivated entirely by “remembrance”—that which Stein actively tried to banish in her conception of the continuous present—her actions are actually characterized by insistence and repetition.
Unlike her sister Chrysothemis, the event of her father’s murder never becomes part of her past: it remains always in her present and dictates her every move, which is why when it is avenged, she must die. Like Elektra’s dance that culminates in her death, the opera, as a whole, is what Stein would call “the thing anybody can see by looking” because its meaning is not attached to narrative progression:

Two things are always the same the dance and war. One might say anything is the same but the dance and war are particularly the same because one can see them. That is what they are for that any one living then can look at them. And games do do both they do the dance and war bullfighting and football playing, it is the dance and war. That is the reason that plays are that, they are the thing anybody can see by looking. Other things are what goes on without everybody seeing, that is why novels are not plays well anyway. (EA 201)

All of the activities Stein names—dance, war, bullfighting, football—do not require their audience members to connect to an unfolding plot or to become acquainted with the actors and the respective characters that they play; they are, as Hoffman notes, “ritualized” activities important not for the story they tell, but for the way in which they enact the given ritual (75). It is in this respect that Elektra “solves the problem of conversation on stage”: Elektra’s utterances do not merely participate in the machinery of narration. Though her internalized thoughts, envoiced through music, may be ritualized, because they are detached from the functionality of plot, they constitute, for Stein, “real conversation.”

In Narrative Prepare for Saints
As landscape theatre, Four Saints functions not only as a solution to the syncopated time of the theatre, but also as an alternative to what Stein considered to be the claustrophobic restrictions of traditional story-telling. Many critics have noted that in the esoteric beginning (or beginnings) of the opera, Stein is working through the problems and possibilities of narration in the theatre (see especially Bowers, They Watch Me 39-40). And as Dydo’s archival work with Stein’s notebooks has shown, Four Saints completed, in a very literal sense, the prose work “Regular Regularly in Narrative” from How to Write, which she was working on when she began Four Saints. In what Dydo describes as an “entirely atypical” move, the two manuscripts even physically overlap, Stein beginning Four Saints in the cahier in which she completes “Regular,” which demonstrates for Dydo the degree to which the two works share thematic and formal preoccupations with narrative (Language That Rises 183).

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120 Over and over again in Lectures in America, Stein details her disdain for stories. In “Portraits and Repetition” she remarks that detective fiction is interesting not for the story it tells (“the kind of crime is the same, and the idea of the story is very often the same”), but, as we have seen, for the way in which each teller recreates it through their idiosyncratic repetition of the story: “Anybody can be interested in a story of crime because no matter how often the witnesses tell the same story the insistence is different” (LA 101). Later in the same lecture she asserts: “A thing you all know is that in the three novels written in this generation, there is, in none of them a story, . . . [T]he important things written in this generation do not tell a story” (LA 110-11). (The three works Stein considers novels are “Proust,” Ulysses, and, unsurprisingly, her own The Making of Americans.) It is in “Plays,” however, that her most vociferous comments about the uselessness of stories appear:

Everybody knows so many stories and what is the use of telling another story. What is the use of telling a story since there are so many and everybody knows so many and tells so many. In the country it is perfectly extraordinary how many complicated dramas go on all the time. And everybody knows them, so why tell another one. There is always a story going on. (LA 119)

121 In this sense, the working subtitle of the work, “Studies for an Opera to Be Sung,” was more correct than the eventual “An Opera to Be Sung” (see Dydo, Language That Rises 186).

122 Stein herself connects the opera to her other narrative projects in a letter to Van Vechten: “I have gotten awfully interested in narrative and I am telling the pleasant events in the life of Lucy Church. You know I just did an opera about St. Therese and Loyola” (11 August 1927; Stein and Van Vechten 1:152). To Thomson, Stein was even more explicit: “The opera has given me lots of ideas for a novel I want to write one” (18 April 1927; in Dydo 203).
Stein’s comments in the lecture “Poetry and Grammar” (written after *Four Saints*) further corroborate the idea that narrative was a kind of *idée fixe* for Stein at this time, the one literary tool of which she could not claim mastery:

I often wonder how I am ever to come to know all that I am to know about narrative. Narrative is a problem to me. I worry about it a good deal these days and I will not write or lecture about it yet, because I am still too worried about it worried about knowing what it is and how it is and where it is and how it is and how it will be what it is. . . . I myself think that something else is going to happen about narrative and I work at it a great deal at this time not work but bother about it. Bother is perhaps the better word for what I am doing just now about narrative.

( *LA* 139)

Stein is genuine when she acknowledges that she had not yet lectured on narrative; however, she had already “bothered” about it in *Four Saints*, a work that becomes inevitably and intimately tied to narrative because it so actively resists narrative. Though Stein wished to approach the theatre, as we have seen, “from the standpoint of *sight and sound* and its relation to *emotion and time*, rather than in relation to story and action,” she could not, in her first attempt at landscape theatre, escape altogether the prominence of story, action, and narration, as the false starts and repeated return to the notion of narration in the first part of *Four Saints* demonstrate.

Stein never uses the word landscape in the opera, but narrative, or some cognate of the word, appears five times in the first twenty lines of the invocation that precedes the first act:

In narrative prepare for saints.
A narrative of prepare for saints in narrative prepare for saints.

Remain to narrate to prepare two saints for saints.

What happened to-day, a narrative. (11)

There then follows an actual example of a “what happened” narrative told in the past tense, counting passages, and several other linguistic digressions on single words or phrases, before Stein begins again:

A narrative who do who does.

A narrative to plan an opera. (14)

Clearly, narrative is to play some role in the opera. If the subject of the opera is the writing of the opera, which the last line suggests, then we might read into the text a particular narrative about Stein’s creative process, as have many critics. Even so, what follows is not, in any typical sense, a narrative. Suggestions of vignettes and tableaux pepper the libretto, as in the description of Saint Therese being photographed (17) or the famous “Pigeons on the grass alas” scene (36), but there is no discernable story, either presented or told.

Though the libretto implies the presence of a narrator with its use of the verb “narrate” in the “Remain to narrate” phrase quote above, there is no character who functions as a narrator; Stein’s question, “A narrative who do who does,” is left unanswered. (It was Thomson, not Stein, who inserted the Comrière and Compère who do seem to take on the roles of narrators in the completed opera.) Throughout the libretto, it is unclear whether the lines are narrated text, speech, or stage directions,
especially in the absence of theatrical conventions like italicized text for stage directions, a listing of dramatis personae, etc. It is impossible, for instance, to discern whether Stein intended declamatory statements like “Saint Therese not seated” to be narrated, spoken, or to function as stage directions (16). To confuse matters even more, when Thomson wrote the music for the opera, he set almost every word of the libretto, including text not traditionally sounded in dramatic realizations of plays or libretti, such as divisional markers like “Scene two.” In setting text like “Scene two,” Thomson preserved some of the ambiguity that his intrusive but necessary assignation of text removes, leaving the decision as to what constitutes “speech” and what constitutes conventionally silent text (stage directions, etc.) to the listener, which makes the experience of hearing the opera more like the experience of reading the libretto because it helps to retain some of the interpretive control lost when a work moves from the page to the stage. That said, he did make alterations to Stein’s text: he changed “Therese” to “Teresa,” because the Italian version of the name is easier to sing; he split the Therese character into two roles, St. Teresa I and St. Teresa II; and he divided and assigned the largely unassigned text to individual characters or choruses, creating dramatis personae that never existed in Stein’s text. Bowers writes that Stein’s dramatic characters “are never characterized, either by habits or speech or through coherent portrayal,” but in fact, her characters are not even named (“The Writer” 210). Aside from the Commère and Compère roles mentioned above, the characters Thomson “creates” can all be traced to Stein’s text, but as discrete characters, they are his invention, since, as I will elaborate below, Stein’s text does not make it clear “how many saints are there in it,” never mind “who are the saints who are in it.”
Language as Dramatis Personae

At times throughout the libretto, Stein’s punctuation appears to assign text to specific names, from which we might extrapolate a cast of characters. Using a convention she follows in her other plays, she precedes lines that read like speech with a name (or names) followed by a period, which seems to serve as a speech prefix, as in the bolded lines below:

Saint Therese Saint Therese must be must be chain left chain right chain chain is it. No one chain is it not chain is it, chained to not to life chained to not to snow chained to chained to go and and gone. Saint Therese might be come to be in this not indifferently.

Saint Therese. Not this not in this not with this.

Saint Therese must be theirs first.

Saint Therese as a young girl being widowed.

Saint Therese. Can she sing.

Saint Therese. Leave later gaily the troubadour plays his guitar.

Saint Therese might it be Martha.

Saint Louise and Saint Celestine and Saint Louis Paul and Saint Settlement Fernande and Ignatius.

Saint Therese. Can women have wishes.

Scene two. (18)

Several critics feel comfortable interpreting this stylistic device as Stein’s unique method of signaling speech. For such critics, all lines not preceded by a name are considered authorial commentary (see Bridgman 186-7, Bowers, “The Writer” 215, n16). Indeed,
for this reason Bowers argues against Thomson’s “parceling out” of much of this unassigned text “to two figures of his invention,” claiming it obscures the way in which “Stein makes herself and her creative process manifest” (“The Writer” 215). But interpreting all unassigned text as authorial commentary is also problematic, since it obscures the performative aspect of the work, inviting a literary reading, rather than a dramatic rendering, of the text. Nor does it account for instances where Stein does not follow a “speech prefix” with any “speech,” as in the long list of names above. Indeed, in the first occurrence of this stylistic device shortly before the first “Act One” begins, the “speech prefix” stands alone:

Saint Therese something like that.

**Saint Therese.**

Saint Therese half in doors and half out of doors.

.................................

Saint Ignatius. Meant and met. (15)

Is the bolded line authorial commentary, or is it what Bowers identifies as “speech notation” (“The Writer” 224 n15)? Stein never makes the distinction clear, instead encouraging idiosyncratic “envoicings” of the text. Indeed, even the existence of so central a character as Saint Therese is disputable. As Bay-Cheng points out, in the

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123 The complexity of the issue is only exacerbated by the progress updates Stein provided Thomson while writing the opera. In one letter, she reports: “I think I have got St. Therese onto the stage, it has been an awful struggle and I think I can keep her on and gradually by the second act get St. Ignatius on and then they will be both on together but not at once in the third act” (qtd. in Mellow 303). Her admission that “it has been an awful struggle” seems to support the idea that St. Therese’s first utterance occurs well into the libretto, after the lengthy “authorial commentary” preamble. On the other hand, she claims that St. Ignatius first appears in the second act, but if we are following the notation practice Bowers and Bridgman outline, his first line, “Meant and met,” quoted above, precedes the first act. Added to all of this is Stein’s own uncertainty, revealed in the repeated modifier, “I think.”
absence of a listing of dramatis personae, “it is highly possible that, for Stein, each repetition of Saint Therese’s name represented an entirely new character (or at the very least a different aspect of the same character), coincidentally also named Saint Therese” (58).^{124}

Thomson’s interpretation of Stein’s punctuation further confuses the assumption that this stylistic device signals speech. It is often repeated that Thomson set every word of Stein’s libretto. But that is not quite true. Thomson set virtually every word, including, in several instances, words or phrases that seem merely to identify who is speaking or that serve to divide the libretto into acts and scenes—but he is not consistent in either regard. For instance, while he does set the phrase, “Scene two” quoted above, he does not set the words “Act One” which occur earlier in the libretto (Stein 15). Clearly interpreting “Act One” as a stage direction, he merely instructs that the curtain part at this point to signal the end of the prologue and the start of act one (Thomson 22-23). When “St. Therese.” precedes a line, Thomson usually has St. Teresa I or St. Teresa II sing the text that follows, indicating that he interprets the sentence to be a stage prefix, or he has another character sing the line; in either case, however, he does not set the words “St. Therese” (or St. Teresa).^{125} In the passage above in the completed opera, for instance, Thomson divides the text as follows:

^{124} This is a bold interpretation, as St. Therese is typically seen as the one inviolable aspect of the work; indeed, her character is the basis for a number of feminist interpretations. Albrinck, for instance argues that Thomson’s division of St. Therese into two characters runs counter to St. Therese’s “integrated personality” in the libretto (8).

^{125} Again, Thomson’s approach to this particular textual issue is not uniform. For instance, he does set the “St. Therese.” portions of the following lines from Stein’s text, which makes “Saint Therese,” in this instance, appear to be the answer to the question, “Who settles a private life”:

Who settles a private life.
Saint Therese. Who settles a private life.
Chorus I and II:  Saint Teresa must be chained left
chain right chain chain is it.

St. Teresa I:  No one chain is it not chain is it,
Chorus I and II:  chained to to life chained to to snow chained to
chained to go and and gone.

Chorus II:  Not this not in this not with this.
Compère:  Saint Teresa a young girl being widowed.
Commère:  Can she sing.
St. Teresa I and II:  Leave later gaily the troubadour plays his guitar.
St. Stephen:  Saint Teresa might it be Martha. Saint Louise and Saint
Celestine and Saint Louis Paul and Saint Settlement
Fernande and Ignatius.

St. Teresa I and II:  Can women have wishes.
Compère:  Scene two. (Thomson 37-8)

Note that in addition to assigning text, something that Stein’s libretto does not do,
Thomson’s setting also deletes some text: the “St. Therese.” portions, as well as the
sentences, “Saint Therese might be come to be in this not indifferently” and “Saint
Therese must be theirs first.”126  Note also that while Thomson seems to interpret the “St.
Therese.” portions as dramatic paratext, he does not interpret the long list of names followed by a period sung by St. Stephen as paratextual speech prefixes; or if he does, he interprets them as prefixes to be sounded. What we have in the completed opera, then, is a mostly unadulterated version of Stein’s words that both simplifies and obscures the original text. On the one hand, Thomson’s division of the lines into dialogue normalizes Stein’s esoteric text, rendering it a stageable script. On the other hand, his inconsistent interpretation of Stein’s stylistic devices further obfuscates the already complex libretto. The names of characters followed by a period only sometimes act as instructions, as conventionally silent text—and even then, these “instructions” are not always followed, as when Thomson has the commère sing what, following this logic, we would assume to be Therese’s line (“Can she sing”). Divisional markers like “Scene two” are only sometimes sounded and treated like speech, not stage directions.

I make these observations not to disparage or critique Thomson’s interpretive decisions, but to demonstrate the difficulty of approaching Stein’s “very undramatic drama” as a dramatic text (Hoffman 79). Even if we are to interpret the lines following the names of characters as speech, it is virtually impossible to fit this “speech” into any sort of narrative framework, since here “language represents, not speech, but thought” (Bowers, “The Writer” 217). The move away from dramatic representation and toward language, so neatly encapsulated in Bowers’s neologism “Langscape” should not, however, be equated with an anti-theatrical prejudice on Stein’s part. Rather, here,
language asserts itself as a dramatic character in and of itself: it is theatre. This is why I resist dividing the text into speech and “authorial commentary” or “stage directions.” It does not really matter who speaks the lines because this is not a character-based theatrical experience, but a language-based one. The text includes no *dramatis personae* list because the only “character” is language itself.

It is ironic that the making of *Four Saints in Three Acts* into an opera requires the creation of *dramatis personae* because its de-emphasis of characters in favor of language is paralleled in the operatic obsession with the voice as voice-object that de-emphasizes characters in favor of singers. While the idea that language is the only character in *Four Saints* may seem to support a reading of the libretto as a closet drama or literary work, in spite of Stein’s remarks to the contrary, the operatic focus on envoiced language helps to legitimize Stein’s claim that the work belongs to the dramatic genre. As envoiced landscape, the *Four Saints* libretto borrows from opera its focus on the physicality of the singing voice but throws into question the physicality of actual characters. We see Stein working out this complex movement when she relates her experience of seeing—or rather, hearing—Sarah Bernhardt when she was a teenager. She remarks: “I knew a little french of course but really it did not matter, it was all so foreign and her voice being so varied and it all being so french I could rest in it untroubled” (*LA* 115). Bernhardt’s voice is not a singing voice, but the effect it has on Stein is comparable to the way in which the voice functions in opera. On the one hand, Stein’s comment demonstrates the power of the voice to replace narrative as the guiding force of a dramatic experience: it is neither the dramatic text itself nor how Bernhardt interprets the text that affects and impacts Stein, but rather, the quality of her voice itself. Because Stein knows too little French to
really understand the narrative, the competing temporalities of the drama and the
audience’s understanding of the drama are eliminated. In Bernhardt’s voice, she rests
“untroubled,” because here language has a function that moves beyond the telling of a
story. On the other hand, Stein’s comment shows an awareness of the possibility of
highlighting the physicality of a voice while extinguishing the physicality of character.
As in opera, in which the character’s metaphoric voice is often overpowered (even
silenced) by the singer’s physical voice, Stein’s relentlessly ambiguous treatment of
diegetic and mimetic material in *Four Saints* divests the work of the physicality of
character, stressing instead the physicality of envoiced language. The chief irony of
Thomson’s original staging of *Four Saints*, of course, was that the singing bodies—
particularly the singing *black* bodies—re-invested the work with precisely that
physicality of character that the libretto itself repeatedly resists, which may well account
for Stein’s discomfort with Thomson’s production “showing the negro bodies” (Stein to
Bradley, 15 May 1933; qtd. in *Virgil Thomson* 231).127

127 The full Stein quote reads:
And I suppose they have good reasons for using negro singers instead of white, there are certain
obvious ones, but I do not care for the idea of showing the negro bodies, it is too much what the
English in what they call ‘modernistic’ novels call futuristic and does not accord with the words
and music to my mind. (Stein to Bradley, 15 May 1933; qtd. in *Virgil Thomson* 231)
Sara Ford, in her analysis of how Stein’s “staging of language” in the operas and plays allowed Stein to
emphasize the performative nature of consciousness (21), makes the important point that “[b]odies still
appear on stage—bodies that are marked in cultural narratives of race and gender, for example—and would
necessarily defy Stein’s most radical attempts at blurring the lines between selves or presenting characters
entirely free of narratives” (33). And as work on opera and the body has shown, it is impossible to divorce
the fetishized singing voice from its instrument—the physical body that produces it—in staged works. As
Hutcheon and Hutcheon note: “It just might be possible to ignore the physicality of the act of singing if we
are listening to a disembodied voice on a recording, but to watch someone sing in the flesh is to be made
instantly aware of not only the Apollonian control and discipline required but also the brute Dionysian
corporeality of voice production” (*Bodily Charm* 113). Thus in spite of Stein’s move away from
represented bodies, the work of the real bodies that envoice her text necessarily restores to the libretto the
notion of character. That said, there is another way of reading the racial history inscribed on the bodies of
Thomson’s singers. Webb’s analysis of Thomson’s casting choice argues that the use of black singers
actually worked in concert with Stein’s project because the controlling racial stereotypes of the time in
Sound and Sense in Stein’s “Musical” Language

Though the *Four Saints* libretto resists narrative coherence and rejects unity of action, the text is not devoid of lexical meaning; it does not sacrifice sense to sound. Read individually and considered in relation to each other, the lines contain and make meaning. They do not, however, rely on the sequential build-up of ideas, events, and action so central to narrative in order to do so. In the long passage quoted above, for instance, the first lines speak to a general theme repeated throughout the opera: St. Therese’s struggle with constriction, confinement, and constraint. In the next line, St. Therese’s repetition of the word “not” verbalizes the resistance described in the line above. But then the imperative “must” and possessive “theirs” in the line that follows reminds us of the obligation that limits the freedom implied by St. Therese’s defiant “Not this not in this not with this.” Stein then generalizes Therese’s struggle with the directive, “Saint Therese as a young girl being widowed,” before contrasting female and male realities with Therese’s responses. Though Therese must *ask* if the indefinite “she” can sing, she can speak of the male troubadour playing his guitar. Like the line that imagines St. Therese as a widowed young girl, the narrated comment that follows questions St. Therese’s saintly identity. If we are to read a name or names followed by a period as Stein’s method of assigning text, the next line appears to ask a number of saints to respond to the previous line with silence. Read as dialogue, the meaning of the line is even more ambiguous, since it is simply a list of names. The final line of the passage,  

practice defeated the notion of “character”; “Considering the racial and social hierarchy in 1934, black actors were the logical choice for comprising a ‘controlling spectacle.’ This approach to performers is consistent with Stein’s aversion to character in her modernist landscape vision of theater, in which persons should not stand out as actors or agents but should merely ‘be’” (455).
however, is much clearer: St. Therese’s question, “Can women have wishes,” more obviously relates to the various themes to which the lines that precede it points.

The extracted passage is fascinating for the way in which it repeatedly gestures toward narrative without becoming narrative.\textsuperscript{128} Indeed, the very fact that it can be extracted and analyzed without contextualizing it is telling: the rules that govern traditional plot development do not apply here. Attempting to synopsize the libretto or “isolate a paraphraseable plot” for the benefit of opera patrons is fruitless (Hoffman 81); freed of the constraints of story-telling, this is “language in a state of beatitude” (Mellow 304; see also Albright, \textit{Untwisting} 311). In its ability to suggest meaning, action, and even stories without actually becoming one of the many stories that Stein dismissed as uninteresting, the libretto becomes like music. Meaning is not fixed, and although the writing is “exact and concentrated and sober” (\textit{LA} 196-8)—it is no example of the automatic writing she studied as a pupil of William James—it allows for multiple, endless, interpretations, to which I will not add yet another:\textsuperscript{129} the important point in terms of “why opera” is not \textit{what} the text might be able to say, but that, like music, it can be made to say so many things.

The libretto thus accomplishes that which Stein in “Poetry and Grammar” praises as the peculiar provenance of verbs:

\textsuperscript{128} Notably, the result is not easily termed “play” or “libretto” either, as Brinnin’s phrases to describe Stein’s theatre pieces indicate. He calls her dramatic oeuvre “a series of . . . literary oddities she was satisfied to call plays” (217) and \textit{Four Saints} in particular “a kind of word-ballet in space in which the simplest verbal movements are elaborated in chants and rituals” (218).

\textsuperscript{129} I am here following Brinnin, who argues: “Discrete meanings a reader might take from piecing together words in such works as \textit{Four Saints} would only reflect his enslavement to connotation; such meanings were but incidental to her intention” (324). Though I do not think discrete meanings were \textit{incidental} to her intention—indeed, I will argue that the process of individual readers creating discrete meanings for themselves was \textit{central} to her intention—I do agree with Brinnin’s basic point. Thematic interpretations of works like \textit{Four Saints} betray an investment in a critical method that the texts themselves attempt to dismantle: the notion that with rigorous exegetic attention, authoritative readings are discoverable.
nouns as I say even by definition are completely not interesting, the same thing is true of adjectives. . . . Verbs and adverbs are more interesting. In the first place they have one very nice quality and that is that they can be so mistaken. . . . Nouns and adjectives never can make mistakes can never be mistaken but verbs can be so endlessly, both as to what they do and how they agree or disagree with whatever they do. . . . Besides being able to be mistaken and to make mistakes verbs can change to look like themselves or to look like something else, they are, so to speak on the move and adverbs move with them and each of them find themselves not at all annoying but very often very much mistaken. (*LA* 126-7)

Importantly, Stein is attracted to the chameleon nature of verbs because of their ability to create an *excess*, not an absence, of signification; this attraction, as Bucknell observes, is borne out in the repeated use of the infinitive in *Four Saints* (*Literary Modernism* 191).

As I have maintained throughout, musical texts always contain meaning. But since they lack the system of signification that defines language, they do not—cannot—signify the same way that literary texts do.¹³⁰ Gyllian Phillips is correct when she states that because neither music nor language “has a fixed point of origin or a concrete objective reality, both are ultimately constructed through performance (whether by reader, player, or musician)” (“Fractured Iconography” 54). However, there is a distinct and obvious difference between the two systems: language is based on signs that make meaning through the interaction of the signified and the signifier. Stein’s libretto becomes like

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¹³⁰ In his review of *Operas and Plays*, Bernstein illustrates the difference between the way in which language and music make meaning thusly: “Words are fundamentally conceptual . . . and are only secondarily decorative; while music is basically abstract and opaque, made up of notes which have no conceptual meaning in themselves, and acquire meaning only in relation to one another.”
music because it constantly refracts and denies fixed meanings, but it is emphatically not word-music, in which the word functions as “a transparent, non-signifying brick whose most important attributes for the construction of the discourse are the musical features of sound and rhythm,” as one critic describes Stein’s method—although sound and rhythm are integral to the construction of meaning in her writing (Pladott 304). The difference is crucial and helps to explain why though “music as it had developed in [Stein’s] lifetime” might “[offer] the best reference” to understanding the works of this period, Stein “would not as a rule tolerate comparisons to music” (Brinnin 297). Music is often said to be able to mean anything because it has no lexical meaning, but Stein’s libretto approaches the condition of meaning anything because it has a surfeit of meaning, because of the “limitless, dense semantic plenitude” of its writing (DeKoven 16, my italics). At some point, these two extremes do meet, but there always remains a distinct difference in how they mean.

The prominence of language in Four Saints mimics the musical function of opera not because of a so-called “musical” style in Stein’s writing, though that is certainly

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131 Smith offers a similar evaluation, writing that Stein’s libretti “represent the final and complete liberation of the word from its prison as a meaning symbol, so that it becomes, primarily, a sound or collection of sounds” (397).

132 In this quote, Brinnin is speaking specifically about the pieces in How to Write, which, he argues, “are as strict and uncompromising in their denial of ‘content’ or melodiousness, and as deliberate in their innocence, as some of the musical compositions of Erik Satie or of his American follower John Cage.” As he continues:

[t]he experience of listening to twenty or thirty of John Cage’s ‘sonatas’ in succession is much like reading How to Write. In both cases the listener or reader, if he is going to accept anything at all, must accept random fragments and oddly matched pieces that are remarkable for what they scrupulously do not do in terms of literature or music rather than for what they do. . . . To read How to Write is finally to learn what language sounds like when it is consciously divorced from sense, in the ordinary sense of sense, and when the impulses and ideas it means to express have been vaporized with the absolute efficiency of a nuclear explosion. (297-8)

Note that Brinnin does not claim that Stein’s language is devoid of lexical meaning in the same way that music is, but that it is “consciously divorced from sense, in the ordinary sense of sense” (my italics). Stein’s works of this period “scrupulously do not” use language in its traditional “functional” capacity but neither do they deplete language of its signifying capacity.
there, but because of its removal of the functionality of language through the erasure of narrative. *Four Saints in Three Acts* “gains its energy and its drama not by its . . . referential properties, but by the way language itself consists of these particular words in this particular order” (Zamsky 724). Stein’s “[move] away from the narrative prospect of telling stories . . . and toward the meaningfulness of form” is not only a move toward lyric, as Zamsky argues (724), but also a move that brings language closer to the particular condition of music that Pater valorized. Removing the teleological impetus of representation (not the linguistic signification of words) gives to language music’s autonomy without diminishing its definitive characteristic—its ability to signify; stripped of its story-telling function, Stein’s language is in the service only of its own art.

Thomson’s explanation in a 1929 letter to Stein of his reluctance to allow *Four Saints* to be translated into German for a projected Darmstadt production helps to elucidate the complicated way in which sound and sense figure here and elsewhere in Stein, and to show why, in Thomson’s words, “this opera isn’t like any other opera.” On the one hand, Thomson’s disinclination toward translation seems to signal the importance of signification; the multiple resonances of each word are too numerous and idiosyncratic to be translated. On the other hand, it seems to signal the unimportance of signification; Thomson allows that a translation could retain “the dramatic value of the libretto” but that “the linguistic sense”—the sound created by Stein’s arrangement of signifiers—would be lost (Thomson, *Selected Letters* 96). Stein’s writing in fact embodies the paradox inherent in the way in which sound, “at once the antithesis and the

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133 The production did not pan out: according to Thomson, the musical director did not find the music “à la hauteur” (Thomson to Stein 11 May 1930; *Selected Letters* 97).
very essence of meaning,” always functions in poetry, making meaning through the play
and artful arrangement of both signifiers and the signified (Perloff and Dworkin 755).

**Operatic Limitations**

As Thomson’s reluctance to have *Four Saints* translated reminds us, opera is
typically presented in its original language. For English speakers, then, this means that
most of the operatic repertoire is heard in a foreign tongue, a point Van Vechten makes in
his defense of Stein’s libretto. “I might inquire,” he asks of his readers, “how many times
you have heard Ponchielli’s *La Gioconda*, how many words of the book your ear caught
during the performance, how much Italian you understand even when it isn’t sung, and
how much of the plot of this bloodthirsty fable you would be able to outline?” (“A Few
Notes” 9-10). In other words, the plot does not really matter: in opera, language has a
function other than the telling of stories (though arguably, surtitles have changed this).

Van Vechten’s point obviously has to be qualified; for one, it is premised on the
assumption that all operagoers are English speakers. More problematic is its suggestion
that the words in Stein’s libretto are inconsequential or that she was attracted to opera
because it freed her of the burden of signification, as Bridgman implies in his explanation
of Stein’s foray into opera: “[i]t seemed appropriate for her, a lyric composition in which

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134 The fact that two of the essays in the *English Studies in Canada* special issue on poetry and sound, “On
Discreteness: Event and Sound in Poetry,” deal with the work of Gertrude Stein is a telling testament to the
importance of sound in Stein’s poetic language. See Scott Pound, “The Difference Sound Makes: Gertrude
Stein and the Poetics of Intonation” and Brian Reed, “Now Not Now: Gertrude Stein Speaks.”

135 Stark Young repeats this point in his enthusiastic review of *Four Saints*: “[the words of the libretto]
should not trouble people who are accustomed to endless operas, with arias, quartettes or dramatic
dialogues of which they understand not one words of the Italian, German and often little of the English,
where it is English—I heard Caruso once when he struck a pin at Miss Farrar’s wrist, sing a whole air, O
Cruel Pin, with exactly the same applause from the audience” (72). Hoffman makes a similar point in his
discussion of Stein’s attraction to opera, noting, “[i]n operas, which for American audiences are almost
always sung in a foreign language, the ‘meaning’ of the lines of dialogue is rarely at issue. Although the
audience usually knows the general plot outline, the specific ‘speeches’ are not vehicles to advance a story
as much as occasions to hear words sung to music” (75).
sound and feeling took precedence over sense and plot’ (177). But Van Vechten’s point does gesture toward two important operatic realities. First, the comprehension of an operatic narrative, particularly without surtitles (a relatively recent advent), is often limited to what can be synopsized, as opposed to the actual “words of the book.” Second, the process of *singing* a text fundamentally changes the way and the ease with which the words are understood.

Rather than lamenting that which gets lost in the transition from the page to the operatic stage, Stein modeled her conception of the theatre on these very limitations, as her high praise for Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas reveals. In *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Stein defines plays, as we have seen, as “the thing anybody can see by looking” in direct opposition to novels, which she describes as “what goes on without everybody seeing,” before invoking comic opera to exemplify her point: “That is the reason why the only plays that are plays from the nineteenth century are Gilbert and Sullivan” (201-2). Buried in Stein’s idiosyncratic definition of plays is the assumption that the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan are “the only plays that are plays from the nineteenth century” because they reject the teleological drive of story telling: they are “the thing anybody can see by looking,” not the thing that progresses from beginning, middle, to end in order to tell a story (see Zamsky 727). To understand what Stein meant by “looking” it is helpful to reference an oft-quoted passage from *Picasso* in which Stein favorably compares airplane travel to travel by automobile. For Stein, “the earth seen from an airplane is more splendid” and more modern because this way of apprehending the earth, like Picasso’s cubism, gives the expression at once, in its totality, without relying upon progression or narrative (88; see Ryan 9).
It is notable that Stein singles out Gilbert and Sullivan, for while I would not go so far as to claim that Gilbert’s libretti are lacking plots, it is true, as Victor Fell Yellin points out, that as librettists, Gilbert and Stein share a “common stage philosophy” in which plot is incidental, not central, to the drama: “Their [Gilbert and Sullivan’s] operas do not deal in suspense” (484). As Yellin’s comparative analysis of Stein’s and Gilbert’s writing demonstrates, there is indeed a stylistic affinity between the two writers, whose work both shows a striking resemblance to nonsense poetry, a genre in which the narrative dimension of language is replaced by linguistic play. Certainly for Stein the appreciation of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas was unconnected to any narrative element in Gilbert’s libretti. In “Plays” she favorably remembers her first theatrical experience, a London production of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *H.M.S. Pinafore*, not for the story it told but for the feeling it engendered: “I do not remember at all seeing a stage I only remember that it felt like a theatre” (*LA* 113). When narrative is incidental, there is no need for the audience, in Stein’s terms, to “make acquaintance” with the drama, thereby eliminating the sense of syncopation in the theatre that bothers Stein. Stories exist in a temporality separate from their audience’s; they project us into the future. The kind of word play that characterize Gilbert’s libretti, on the other hand, is, like Stein’s writing, not teleologically driven: “Stein’s plays assert, not the primacy of occasion, but the primacy of language” (Bowers, “The Writer” 210). Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas are hardly considered experimental in the way in which Stein’s works are. Yet as Yellin’s

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136 This opera never seems to have lost its attraction for her. She saw it in Chicago in March 1935 during her American lecture tour (Stein and Wilder 348). Nor did she lose her appreciation for Gilbert and Sullivan in general: in a letter to Van Vechten she expresses her hope that *Four Saints* “will become a popular opera like Gilbert and Sullivan” (21 February 1938; Stein and Van Vechten 2: 591).
rendering of portions of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Princess Ida* into prose demonstrates, Gilbert’s words, divorced from their musical setting, share more than a passing resemblance to Stein’s esoteric style:

> Come mighty must inevitable shall in thee I trust. . . . Oh weak might be oh may might could would should. . . . I shall some day. Not yet. I bide my time. I once was some one and the was will be. The Present as we speak becomes the past the past repeats itself and so is future. This sounds involved. It’s not. It’s right enough. (qtd. in Yellins 482).

Because Gilbert’s libretti focus on linguistic play, not plot, they strip language of its narrative impetus, and the operas become a plastic art, a landscape, “the thing anybody can see by looking.”

As the difference between reading the Gilbert and Sullivan passage from *Princess Ida* as prose or even poetry, and listening to it within its proper operatic context indicates, an operatic text acquires a completely different character than a read or dramatically presented text. Set to music in an entirely artificial formal setting, the text is subject to countless musical edits long before it is interpreted by a performer: in a process Thomson calls “pacing,” the text is broken up by the composer, not necessarily according to punctuation markings or the internal rhythm of the text, but according to the movement of the musical line, so some words are allotted longer time values than others, and phrases or words are often repeated either for emphasis or for musical style (*Virgil Thomson* 105). Thus the progression of events, ideas, and dialogue are constantly interrupted, and the teleological impetus of the narrative, undermined, since the opera’s movement is dictated by musical, not narratological, time. Indeed, arias, which serve a
similar dramatic function as soliloquies, do in fact stop narrative time. In these special moments, the drama is momentarily suspended, as the character pontificates within a highly stylized artistic form, the ostensible dramatic purpose of which is to render apparent the character’s interiority, but which, in practice, often showcases the singer’s voice. Ironically, this stopping and starting of the dramatic clock actually seems to eliminate the sense of syncopation that so troubles Stein because its effect is to deflect attention away from the progression of the narrative and to allow the audience a space in which to “catch up” with the dramatic event.

As Stein approvingly wrote of hearing *A Wedding Bouquet* for the first time, “each time a musician does something with the words it makes it do what they never did do” (*EA* 327). Because it takes longer to sing a text than to speak it, plot lines are regularly compressed, sometimes to the point of incomprehensibility. Kramer calls this result of this process, whereby written text is transformed by its setting into song, “the image of speech” (*Music and Poetry* 131), but as Bucknell notes, “Stein’s language is already transformed into an image of speech before it comes to music” (*Literary Modernism* 190). Indeed, much of her writing, in Thomson’s experience, “lies closer to musical timings than to speech timings” (*A Reader* 105).

DeKoven’s explanation of Stein’s “obstruction of normal reading” (5) through the example of the staccato punctuation in the title of the play *They Must. Be Wedded. To Their Wife* is a brilliant illustration of how Stein’s “setting” of her own text mimics the work of the composer.

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137 As Thomson explains, the “peroration-by-repetition” ending of a work like *Capital Capitals* strongly recalls “the insistences of a Beethoven finale” (*A Reader* 105). See also Hoffman, who notes: “Stein’s ritualistically repetitive dramas fit almost perfectly the needs of the operatic composer. The speeches are simple and rhythmic, they contain much internal rhyme, and they repeat” (78).
faced with a libretto (120). One consequence of the practicalities of setting text to music is the common feeling that “even an English-language opera usually sounds as if it is in a foreign language [to an English-speaking audience]” (Cohen 389). Again, Stein’s writing seems to have acquired this “foreign” character before it comes to music. Stein was interested in recovering the fullness of the meaning of words through the unfamiliar juxtaposition of ordinary words—through defamiliarization (see Perloff 75). As Thornton Wilder put it in his introduction to *Four in America*, “Stein felt that writing must accomplish a revolution whereby it could report things as they were in themselves before our minds had appropriated them and robbed them of their objectivity ‘in pure existing’” (Simon 134). Following critics Ellen Berry and Harriett Scott Chessman, Eric Neel, in his approach to the difficult “Patriarchal Poetry” (1927), underscores the necessity of reading Stein’s work aloud implicit in Wilder’s description of her defamiliarizing technique. Comprehension, Neel argues, begins when “the ‘unreadability’ of Stein’s work is understood as an imperative to read, and to read aloud, rather than as a limit to interpretation” (94). Neel’s argument is particularly provocative given both the date of the work he addresses and the theme announced in its title. As the difficult work—even by Stein’s standards—was written in the same year as *Four Saints*, we might conjecture that Stein found in her experience of writing opera not only a solution to a *dramatic* problem but also the fulfillment of a poetics of resistance that enacts in its every production the enabling aesthetic of envoiced reading. Stein’s playful approach to language demands its envoicing even without it being rendered into opera because it is only through its *sounding* that the ear can catch what the desensitized eye misses.
The Envoiced Landscape

Shortly after Stein instructs “Repeat First Act” in the first “Act One” of the *Four Saints* libretto (16), she writes: “Enact end of an act” (17). As directions, both phrases lend credence to the assertion that “Stein’s texts are an invitation for the reader to perform the reading with his or her body” (Steidele 156), as does the very fact that Stein’s *Four Saints* is subtitled “An Opera To Be Sung.” As a performative text, the libretto exists in a liminal space between completion and incompletion, a state thematically echoed in its false starts. Reading like drafts, the repeated beginnings of the opera not only put into practice Stein’s notion of the continuous present as it is articulated in the lecture “Composition as Explanation,” but exemplify what Bowers terms “process poetics,” taking the supposed theme of the opera—“the working artist’s working life”—to its literal extreme (Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* 90). But the particular phrase “Enact end of an act” is more than an instruction to the audience: it also conceals a pun between “an act” and “enact” that not only emphasizes the performative and participatory imperative through the double enunciation of the directive, “enact,” but also demonstrates how the process of envoicing language bridges the seeming intractable divide between sound and sense. Through the linguistic play heard in an envoiced rendering of the text, “An act” resonates with all of the meanings of the noun “act” *in addition* to the meanings available in its homophonic twin, the verb “enact”—especially in the absence of a “clarifying” visual text, as is the case in its operatic iteration.

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138 See Bucknell’s analysis of historicity and temporality in the operatically rendered *Four Saints* in relation to the notion of “beginning again and again” articulated in “Composition as Explanation” (*Literary Modernism* 162-221). As Bowers writes, by “mak[ing] the writing process a part of the performance” Stein “blurs the temporal distinction between writing and performance” (“The Writer” 221).
The effect of the envoiced landscape is the transfer of ownership of the text from the author to its audience. Though Stein the author is present everywhere in the text, as her injunction toward the end of the libretto, “When this you see remember me” (47), reminds us, she rejects the corollary of authority inscribed in the etymology of the word author.[^139] Rather, the role of the author is to reinstitute for the audience the moment of creation. Thus it is not the power of “creation” but the possibilities of infinite “re-creation” that interest Stein, as is implied in her explanation of her preference for the malleable verb: “I found in longer things like Operas and Plays . . . that I could come nearer to avoiding names in recreating something. . . . So then poetry up to the present time has been a poetry of nouns a poetry of naming something of really naming that thing passionately completely passionately naming that thing by its name” (LA 144). Stein’s intention is to suggest to the reader, as Van Vechten memorably put it, “a thousand channels for his mind and sense to drift along, a thousand, instead of a stupid one” (“How to Read Gertrude Stein” 34). Implicit in this “grammar for democracy” (Dydo, Language That Rises 17) is a challenge to the theatrical audience members to re-imagine the nature of their passivity: not to think rather than enjoy, but to think because they enjoy.

For Stein, the imperative to make acquaintance in the theatre is more than a bothersome syncopation: it is a reflection of a patriarchal mode of writing that demands its audience cede control of the experience to the teller of the narrative:

In this respect an exciting story does the same only in the exciting story, you so to

[^139]: As Hoffman writes, Stein “always made the ‘subject’ of her work the contents of her consciousness as expressed by the narrative voice” (81).
speak have control of it as you have in your memory of a really exciting scene, it is not as it is on the stage a thing over which you have no real control. You can with an exciting story find out the end and so begin over again just as you can in remembering an exciting scene, but the stage is different, it is not real and yet it is not within your control as the memory of an exciting thing is or the reading of an exciting book. No matter how well you know the end of the stage story it is nevertheless not within your control . . . . (LA 98)

In traditional theatre, the audience has to follow the narrative at the pace set out by the actors and directors; the role of the audience in the making of the work is limited to that of a passive receiver. With landscape theatre, Stein subverts the reception-oriented nature of the theatre by limiting the role of narrative, de-emphasizing character, and envoicing her landscape. As Bowers reminds us, though landscape may be one of the boring nouns Stein dismisses in the quotation above, considered as “a way of seeing, the imposition of a point of view upon nature,” it is also a verb (“The Composition” 125, my italics; see also Albrinck 6; Frank, “Resonating Bodies” 518).

The envoiced landscape calls for a new kind of textual apprehension that questions the synonymy of authority and authorship. This suspicion of the author as “owner” of the text permeates every aspect of Stein’s writing, from her “resistance to ‘explanation,’” which Chessman identifies as a “deeply political” stance (148), to her use (or disuse) of something so commonplace as the comma: “A comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it and to me for many years and I still do feel that way about it only now I do not pay as much attention to them, the use of them was positively
degrading” (*LA* 131-2). In this passage from “Poetry and Grammar” Stein does more than link her grammatical irreverence to a writerly position that deems such authorial markings “degrading” and, as she says later, “enfeebling” (133); she enacts her own playful approach to language, inserting a comma in a place that creates a comma splice directly after saying she “does not pay as much attention to them.” Bay-Cheng writes that the lack of punctuation in works like *Four Saints*, “forc[es] the reader or speaker to move though the language without cues indicating where to pause, breathe, or place emphasis,” at once defamiliarizing language and demanding a participatory reading of the text (56). While I agree with Bay-Cheng’s observation as it relates to the *reading* of the libretto, I would amend her statement as it relates to the envoiced text, which does not replace the authority of authorship with yet another imperative, but instead, reinserts the notion of “play” into the dramatic form.

In his review of the 1934 production of *Four Saints* for the *New York Times*, Van Vechten advises audiences to approach the opera with “a kind of receptive passivity, a complete relaxation of the perceptions,” which seems to contradict Stein’s desire to wrench control away from the theatrical machinery, except that his intention in so advising is to suggest an intellectual space in which the audience can “discover” the work free of expectation and remembrance—to envoice it, as it were, in their own “now” (“On Words and Music”). In an address to a radio audience, Thomson dispenses similar advice:

> Please do not try to construe the words of this opera literally […] or to seek in it any abstruse symbolism. If, by means of the poet’s liberties with logic and the composer’s constant use of the simplest elements in our musical vernacular,
something is here evoked of the child-like gaiety and mystical strength of lives devoted in common to a non-materialistic end, the authors will consider their message to have been communicated. (qtd. in Brinnin 325)

Together with Stein’s pleasure that people wrote to her to say that “they are having a good time while the opera is going on” (LA 131), Van Vechten’s and Thomson’s comments point to a markedly different characterization of and approach to the stereotypically difficult modernist text as one that “requires a reverent attention and attitude on the part of the viewer” (Puchner 105). In “Plays,” Stein implies that the feeling of nervousness caused by syncopation in the theatre is a condition of modernity:

The jazz bands made of this thing, the thing that makes you nervous at the theatre, they made of this thing an end in itself. They made of this different tempo a something that was nothing but a difference in tempo between anybody and everybody including all those doing it and all those hearing and seeing it. In theatre of course this difference in tempo is less violent but still it is there and it does make anybody nervous. (LA 95)

Rather than exploiting or representing this feeling of nervousness, of anxiety, or demanding its abolishment, however, Stein plays with language to create a theatre in which one can “rest untroubled.” Her approach to modernity thus is neither the didacticism of Brecht’s “Epic Theatre” or the selectiveness of Pound’s pedagogical translation but the playful possibilities of an envoiced landscape not burdened by the tyranny of memory, narration, or history.

Sarah Wilson, in her discussion of Stein’s writing in relation to 1930s radio, shows the affinity between the way in which radio discussion programs “attempted to
reorient audience enjoyment away from the certainty of conventional knowing” and Stein’s overt focus on audience participation in her writing of this period (264). To Wilson’s excellent discussion of the ways in which this engagement with radio coloured Stein’s late works I would add the influence that her operatic success had on the unique way in which she encouraged, through language, an audience reception that conjoined enjoyment with agency. As Stein explained to William Lundell in a radio interview given the same year *Four Saints* premiered on Broadway: “[i]f you enjoy you understand if you understand you enjoy” (qtd. in Wilson 264).

**Landscape’s Limitations**

The appropriation of opera’s generic limitations helped Stein conceive of landscape theatre, but even with so transparent a score as Thomson’s, in the end, opera’s generic possibilities may have proved too powerful a force. About Stein’s writing, which he admired immensely, Thomson wrote that it did not lack music, but that it *likes* music—a statement that helps to introduce a significant quandary when we ask why Stein agreed to write libretti (*Virgil Thomson* 105). Much against Stein’s insistence that melody ought to be a “by-product” and not “an end in itself,” her writing is often appreciated as an exercise in sound and, like a score, it comes alive when it is sounded (*LA* 120). The affinity between music and Stein’s writing seems, then, to make the decision to collaborate on an opera a natural choice. Indeed, Richard Howard goes so far as to assert that Stein’s plays “are never successful when they are not presented with music” (Rosten et al. 13). But if Stein’s works are already “music,” then why should they be put to music? Hearing Stein’s writing envoiced “produces a field of sound that surrounds the script (sometimes supplementing, sometimes contradicting)” (Neel 99). Does the
addition of Thomson’s literal music to the “field of sound” in Stein’s writing not create an excess of sound, a disconcerting and discordant doubling, a “syncopation” of a different sort? Sharing space with music, are her words not destined to be subordinated by the art form to which they can only “aspire”? Or is this a way to dismantle the traditional pairing of language and music that defines opera? Does the completed work actually reverse the typical designation, whereby the words function as narrative, providing the lexical meaning of the work, and the music functions as the power behind them, charging the work with its emotional component without specifically advancing the narrative? Is Thomson’s straightforward music the “narrative” to Stein’s baffling but beautiful “music”? 

We find answers to some of these questions in a point that Stein repeats several times in her discussion of syncopation in the theatre in “Plays”: “Is the thing seen or the thing heard the thing that makes most of its impression upon you at the theatre. How much has the hearing to do with it and how little. Does the thing heard replace the thing seen. Does it help or does it interfere with it” (LA 101). Stein never directly answers the question, but her decision not to seek musical accompaniments for her subsequent operas...

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140 “After William Carlos Williams saw the 1934 production in Hartford, he commented that Stein’s words did not need the music, which in fact interfered with them. He understood that the musical setting, which gave Stein’s words song, also swallowed the words and froze them into forms that they themselves never rigidly hold” (qtd. in Dydo, Language That Rises 199). 
141 Gyllian Phillips gestures toward this assessment in her analysis of construction of gender through language in Four Saints: “Ironically, in the notion of music/text dialogue I propose here, music ‘means’ through an increased awareness of the possibility of reference while language slides closer to music through a disruption of the signified/signifier binary” (“Fractured Iconography” 54). Calling Thomson’s music “rich in teleological tendency” (192), Bucknell also suggests this shift, though he qualifies the degree to which Thomson’s music actually narrativizes Stein’s libretto: “[s]etting Stein’s ‘expressive obscurity’ through tonal means creates an illusion of continuity; it supplies a progression which the language does not have. But at the same time, Thomson’s tonality plays a kind of parodic dance with the language, as if one were the discontinuous image of the other” (Literary Modernism 185). Interpretations such as these may explain why “at the Capitals show the poets were all disgusted with the words and the composers thought the music too low for anything” (Thomson to Stein 26 February 1929; qtd. in Gallup 229).
suggest that, a cellophane set and an all-black cast notwithstanding, in opera it is “the thing heard . . . that makes most of its impression upon you at the theatre” and the “thing heard” is not the music of the words but the music made by the words being set to a specific melody. While she seemed satisfied that *Four Saints in Three Acts* solved the problem of “nervousness” in the theatre, she also reveals her discomfort with its success in her repeated return to the question of whether one could “hear and see and feel at the same time” (*LA* 115).

Auden may have been content to admit that the librettist’s role is “minor” (*Secondary Worlds* 90, 115), but Stein was less willing to write herself out of her operatic endeavors. Through *Four Saints*’s success, Stein came to see that the same operatic conventions that help the text to “make acquaintance” also drown out the music of her text. The same music that allows the text to “move but . . . also stay” also imposes a false sense of teleological direction to the landscape that is Stein’s text. The same operatic conventions that deflect the omnipresence of narrative suggest a narrative of their own. Recognizing that “[t]he attempt to put the opera on *in fact* brings it into a collision with a multiplicity of discourses and practices with which it must involve itself” (Bucknell, *Literary Modernism* 219), Stein did not seek musical accompaniments for her subsequent operas, *A Lyrical Opera Made By Two* (1928) and *Madame Recamier* (1930), though she

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142 Repeated in all accounts and reviews of the 1934 production of *Four Saints* are Florine Stettheimer’s set and the all black cast; indeed, Thomson combines the two in an adjectival phrase to describe the superiority of the *Four Saints* production in comparison to the *Mother of Us All* premiere: “The stage was beautiful for sight and sound, though not be compared to my Negroes-and-cellophane *Four Saints*” (*Virgil Thomson* 384). Judith Brown’s reading of Florine Stettheimer’s set in the context of the “early-century semiotics of plastics” helps to remind us just how spectacular the set would have seemed and how apt its associations were to the project as a whole (606). As Brown elaborates, the transparent blankness of the “Botticellophane,” as one reviewer memorably described it, worked as a metaphor for Stein’s aesthetic of complicated simplicity even as its “stark artificiality . . . proclaimed . . . its unsurpassed hold on the new” (615, 605).
did put into practice the principles of envoiced landscape, borne of her experience writing her first opera. Note that in the title of *A Lyrical Opera*, which Dydo calls “the private and intimate complement” to *Four Saints* (227), the opera is *made* by two; it does not exit *until* it is envoiced. What makes these music-less pieces “operas,” other than Stein’s explicit designation of them as such, is Stein’s challenge for the works “to be sung,” to be envoiced, against the fact that “the majority of Stein’s operas exist as texts to be read, without obvious or easy translation into the space of performance” (Bucknell, *Literary Modernism* 164). When Stein does return to operatic collaboration, with *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938) and *The Mother of Us All* (1946), she does so with the full awareness of how the production of her libretti as operatic texts changes them. Rather than using the experience of writing opera to create a form of theatre that in effect becomes a music-less opera, she focuses explicitly on that which music can never do better than language: narrative. Curiously, though, it is once again *opera* that solves this dramatic problem for her: “I am so happy that you liked the Faust, I have been struggling with this problem of dramatic narrative and in that I think I got it and I am so pleased you like it” (26 July 1938; Stein and Van Vechten 2: 600-1). For Stein, as for Pound, opera’s otherness facilitates the continual re-imagining of the very building blocks of literature, which is, as Stein notes, the essence of modernism: “Joyce and I are at opposite poles but our work comes to the same thing, the creation of something new” (qtd. in Brinnin 290).
Chapter 3
Woolf Contra Wagner? Moments of the Gesamtkunstwerk in The Waves

The operatic imperative in the work of modernist writers like Pound and Stein is immediately apparent because both authors actually wrote operas. But how does it manifest itself in the work of a writer like Virginia Woolf, who did not write operas? Unlike some of the interdisciplinary critical approaches to Woolf’s experimental novels, mine will not use the model of opera to suggest that the novels I discuss “are” something other than novels, though I will argue that they use operatic strategies to push the composite parts of the novel—language, narrative, and structure—into a new, distinctly hybrid realm. While Woolf begins her novelistic career demonstrating an almost unmitigated enthusiasm for music’s purported power in The Voyage Out, her mature understanding of the art form rejects the nineteenth-century belief—largely held over into the first part of the twentieth century (and as we saw in the discussion of Pound’s operas, even promoted by some modernists)—that music can bridge the thinking and unthinking worlds to reveal a “truth” inaccessible to, or not representable by, literature and language. Rather than characterizing or representing music as the artistic or aesthetic panacea that it is for Rachel Vinrace in The Voyage Out—and, importantly, for Richard Wagner in his Musikdramas—both The Waves and Between the Acts, which I shall discuss in the next chapter, consistently question the nineteenth-century notion of music’s capacity to transcend language, embracing instead a distinctly operatic frame of reference, as Woolf celebrates the novel as an omnivorous but democratic, open-ended, contingent form,
endlessly capable of incorporating and co-opting other genres. The antitheses of the dictatorially charged “total work of art,” The Waves and Between the Acts grapple with modernism’s most pressing problem: how to represent fragmentation yet achieve aesthetic unity.

Woolf never uses the word “operatic” to describe The Waves or Between the Acts, but both novels strongly invoke the genre’s hybridity, which is a concept Woolf does call upon in her description of the novel of the future in the essay “Poetry, Fiction and the Future” (1927). “That cannibal, the novel,” asserts Woolf in her strikingly Bakhtinian description of the novel of the future (a novel that sounds very much like The Waves or Between the Acts), “which has devoured so many forms of art will by then [the future] have devoured even more,” including poetry, prose, and drama (Granite and Rainbow 18). For Woolf, the cannibalistic nature of the modern novel is a natural expression of the modern mind, which she describes as “full of monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable

143 As Alastair Fowler’s work in Kinds of Literature demonstrates, most literary genres are, to some extent, hybridized, and the novel in particular “has assimilated other kinds of prose fiction” to the point where it has become “so comprehensive” a genre that it “has largely ceased to function as a kind in the ordinary way” (118). And of course Bakhtin also makes the point that the novel is, inherently, a hybridized genre; indeed, for Bakhtin, it is this quality that, in contradistinction to the epic’s singular focus, accounts for the novel’s burgeoning popularity and particular timeliness in the twentieth century. However, what distinguishes The Waves and Between the Acts from experimental novels like the “omnigenic Ulysses” (Fowler 125) or Woolf’s own To the Lighthouse, which Fowler claims “takes the [generic] modification about as far as feasible without dissolving the form of the novel altogether” (211), is less their assimilation of other prose “kinds,” to use Fowler’s term, and more their sustained, conscious mixing of genres. Woolf’s recourse in both Between the Acts and The Waves to a hybrid novelistic form is clearly borne out of the desire to create a novel “in a new method,” the phrase she eventually used to articulate her achievement in Between the Acts (23 November 1940; Diary 5: 341), to write the “cannibalistic” novel she describes at length in “Poetry, Fiction and the Future.” As Woolf’s own difficulty categorizing these novels attests, The Waves, tending as it does toward poetry, and Between the Acts, toward drama, are best thought of as what Fowler calls “outright hybrid[s], where two or more complete repertoires are present in such proportions that no one of them dominates” (183).

144 Following Melba Cuddy-Keane, I use the title Woolf gave for this work (which was written to be read at the Oxford University English Club), not the more common title, “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” which is the title Leonard gave the essay when he posthumously reprinted it (Virginia Woolf, The Intellectual, and the Public Sphere 56).
emotions” (*Granite and Rainbow* 12), echoing language commonly used to describe opera. Indeed, the essay closes with a description of a “form one may prophesy” that seems to call explicitly for an operatic novel:

One can imagine that [the writer of this form] will have extended the scope of his interest so as to dramatize some of those influences which play so large a part in life, yet have so far escaped the novelist—the power of music, the stimulus of sight, the effect on us of the shape of trees or the play of colour, the emotions bred in us by crowds, the obscure terrors and hatreds which come so irrationally in certain places or from certain people, the delight of movement, the intoxication of wine. (*Granite and Rainbow* 23)

The description fits nearly every aspect of opera, from its obvious musical, dramatic, and visual dimensions to the less obvious dimensions of its social text (“the emotions bred in us by crowds”); indeed, the description would seem to be downright Wagnerian in its inclusiveness.

As I hope to demonstrate with my examination of the Wagnerian intertext woven through *The Waves*, however, there is a marked philosophical difference between Woolf’s “cannibalistic” novel and Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. As we shall see, just as Woolf’s letters betray a concomitant attraction and repulsion toward Wagner’s operas,

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145 As the figurative language used in Nielsen’s 1925 article, “Words, Music, and Program Music” demonstrates, the mixing of the arts, something unavoidable in opera, was commonly regarded as a dangerous, Dr. Frankenstein-like project doomed to strip individual art forms of their aesthetic worth: We are experiencing a strange, impotent, abnormal tendency to mix the arts one with another: a singularly perverse craving to see what will come out of the most absurd conglomeration. It is not a sane breeder’s attempt to improve his strains, but a queer, emasculate desire to see monsters. . . . Terms like “music” in painting, “colour” in music, “pictorial effect” in sculpture, and “architecture” in poetry are no longer just figures of speech but are taken quite literally by artists striving . . . to express the essence of one art in the medium of another. . . . [I]t is an unmistakable sign that we are at the bottom in a period of decline. (27)
her use of Wagner in *The Waves* betrays also a simultaneous admiration for, and critique of, Wagnerian aesthetics. Like the other artists of her era, Woolf cannot escape Wagner. Though she makes use of Wagnerian allusions and compositional methods in her formal structuring of the novel, these techniques are ultimately shown to support a thesis antithetical to the philosophical argument underlying Wagnerian aesthetics, namely, his insistence on the complete unification of form and feeling through the overwhelming emotional power of music. Though the novel’s *form* incorporates a kind of musical text to create a sense of aesthetic unity reminiscent of Wagner’s continuous music, its *content* recurrently denies the possibility of achieving such unity, placing value instead on “moments of being.” Whereas the totalizing impulse of Wagnerian opera seeks to overcome difference, Woolf’s use and representation of “music” “poetry” and “drama” in her narrative embraces the inherent “impurity” of operatic form.

**Virginia Woolf and Music**

Of the three modernists I discuss, Virginia Woolf is, at least on the surface, the least obviously connected to the world of opera. She did not write libretti; nor was she musically gifted herself; nor was she inclined toward the musico-literary projects so much in vogue in the modernist period.\(^{146}\) Indeed, in a perceptive description of a performance of *Façade* at the Aeolian Hall, she writes of “listening, in a dazed way” to Edith Sitwell “vociferating through the megaphone” in a tone that suggests, at best, bemused bewilderment (13 June 1923; *Diary 2*: 245-6).\(^{147}\) This tone is repeated in her

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\(^{146}\) The result of these early musico-literary projects is, as Irene Morra’s focus on the role of the “literary librettist” in the creation of a distinctly British operatic tradition shows, an operatic practice in Britain characterized by “a continuing aspiration towards literary respectability” (119).

\(^{147}\) Incidentally, “vociferating” is the same verb she uses to describe Hitler’s disembodied voice, which was broadcast over the BBC (13 September 1938; *Diary 5* 169), and as I shall note later, also La Trobe’s voice
description, in a letter to Clive Bell, of Lydia Lopokova’s suggestion that she turn a
scene from Orlando into a ballet. “But the most illusory part of Lydia’s visit,” exclaims
Woolf, “was that she proposes to set a scene in Orlando to music and to dance to it
behind a microphone at Savoy Hill [BBC]—Will I therefore rearrange the words to suit
music to be written by Constant Lambert?” (19 January 1931; Letters 2: 279). And
certainly, of the different modernist “coteries” represented by Joyce and Pound, Stein,
and Woolf, hers is the least overtly musical. Undoubtedly due to the strong painterly
influence of Roger Fry, the interdisciplinary projects of the Bloomsbury circle are
typically seen to involve the merging of literature and the visual arts—a relationship
manifest throughout Woolf’s writings.¹⁴⁸ Think, for instance, of the spatial, rather than
temporal, imagery implied by the titles of Jacob’s Room or “A Room of One’s Own”; the
centrality of Lily’s painting in To the Lighthouse; the dust jackets, designed by Vanessa
Bell, that bookend all of Woolf’s fiction.

That said, even a cursory glance at Woolf’s oeuvre indicates that the musical and
temporal arts are by no means silent in her writings. We might observe, for instance, that
in 1909, she went to Bayreuth, which resulted in, among other things, a review essay for

shouting from the trees (84), which eventually modulates to become the “megaphonic, anonymous” voice
of the last act in the pageant in Between the Acts (111).

¹⁴⁸ I mean this in a comparative sense. Bloomsbury was by no means devoid of musical influences: Saxon
Sydney-Turner dabbled in composition and encouraged Woolf’s interest in Wagner. John Maynard
Keynes, though not musical in his own right, brought Diaghilev dancer Lydia Lopokova, whom he married
in 1925, to the “group” and later helped to found the Vic-Wells Ballet. As discussed in the introduction, E.
M. Forster, who consistently draws on musical language in his critical writings, famously opens chapter
five of Howards End with an explicit discussion about the interrelationship of music and the other arts, and
later wrote the libretto (with Eric Crozier) for Benjamin Britten’s Billy Budd. Moreover, many of the artists
associated with Bloomsbury, like Duncan Grant and Roger Fry, were music lovers. Indeed, music was, as
Linda Hutcheon notes, “a potent link among” E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, and Charles Mauron (“Sublime
Noise” 142). Still, as “[m]ost members of the Bloomsbury group could neither read music nor play musical
instruments,” it is easy to see how Peter Jacobs’s conclusion, that “music was the stillborn child of
Bloomsbury arts” (228), has been handed down as a modernist truism.
The Times detailing the experience; that the protagonist of her first novel, The Voyage Out, is a pianist; that the short story, “The String Quartet” takes a musical concert as its setting; that the titles of later novels, like The Years and Between the Acts, imply temporal movement in much the same way that Jacob’s Room and A Room of One’s Own imply spatial imagery (indeed, that one of the proposed titles for The Years was Music),¹⁴⁹ that she and Leonard “used to listen to the wireless and gramophone—classical music—practically every night” (Leonard Woolf, Letters 528); that in the last decade of her life, she entered into a very close (if at times fractious) friendship with the English composer, Ethel Smyth. Indeed, in “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf notes that pictorial imagery alone is insufficient to call up the memories that compose her life, interrupting an introductory clause, “The strength of these pictures,” with the qualifier, “but sight was always then so much mixed with sound that picture is not the right word” (Moments of Being 67).

By setting up this duality between literature and music and literature and the visual arts, I do not mean to indicate that Woolf’s extra-literary influences have to be limited to one art or the other—indeed, the operatic character of her later writings is created in part by her recourse to artistic strategies from a range of disciplines—but I do want to preface my argument about Woolf and opera with the recognition that Woolf’s life and writings demonstrate a complex response to the modernist tendency toward the conscious linkage of literature and the other arts that I discuss in chapter one. As an artist, Woolf was, above all, a writer, and for all the ways in which her writing exhibits

¹⁴⁹ As she was nearing completion of The Years, Woolf noted in her diary, “I think I see the end of Here & Now (or Music, or Dawn or whatever I shall call it)” (17 August 1934; Diaries 4 237).
the elements of music or the visual arts or architecture or dance, she never strays from the written word as her means of expression.\(^{150}\) Though Woolf, like Joyce, is a writer particularly alert to the *sounds* of words, when she uses opera and its attendant musical text in her fiction, it is ultimately, like Pound, in the service of literature—a way to create a literary effect, to move out of a literary constriction, to change the way her readers read and respond to literary works.\(^{151}\)

Although there are few scholarly analyses of Woolf and opera aside from thematic studies of specific operatic intertexts,\(^ {152}\) there is a strong critical tradition that conceives of Woolf’s writing in broad musical terms.\(^ {153}\) And indeed, there are

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150 I discuss in detail the critical work on Woolf and music and sound later. For an excellent study of the influence of the visual arts on Woolf’s style, particularly, the influence of Vanessa Bell, see Diane F. Gillespie’s *The Sisters’ Arts*; see also her edited volume, *The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf* for additional articles on the influences of the visual arts (including photography), as well as articles on Woolf and film, ballet, and music.

151 Pound and Woolf are not often easily aligned, yet it is interesting that they both shared the opinion that the art of writing and the art of music ought to be regarded as inseparable pursuits. In “Street Music,” Woolf asserts: “when the sense of rhythm was thoroughly alive in every mind we should if I mistake not, notice a great improvement not only in the ordering of all the affairs of daily life, but also in the art of writing, which is nearly allied to the art of music, and is chiefly degenerate because it has forgotten its allegiance” (*Essays* 1:31).

152 See, in particular, Jane Marcus’s work. In one essay, she argues that *Night and Day* “depends structurally on Mozart, stylistically on Jane Austen, and thematically on Ibsen,” ultimately imagining *Night and Day* “as comic opera” (“Enchanted Organs, Magic Bells” 99). In another article, she focuses on the Wagnerian influence in *The Years*, suggesting that it is “a kind of Greek opera, simultaneously a dirge and a dithyramb celebrating the death and rebirth of the Spirit of the Year” (“*The Years as Götterdämmerung*” 36). A host of other critics, as I note later, have similarly focused on Woolf’s intense interest in Wagner.

153 For one of Woolf’s earliest critics, the characters in *The Waves* speak in “recitatives,” in whose rhythm “one seems to hear such a surge and breathing of the sea as swings below the orchestration of Dame Ethel Smyth’s, her friend’s, opera, *The Wreckers*” (Holby 190, 193). John Briggs calls Bernard’s final speech an “aria” (108). Forster, in his 1942 lecture on Woolf, asserts that the form of *To the Lighthouse* “demand[s] a musical analogy” (13), an assertion that Harold Fromm, writing in 1968, takes up, calling the novel a musical composition in three movements complete with recurring themes and leitmotifs that “[afford] the sympathetic reader that attainment of ecstatic self-obliteration which one does not usually expect to find anywhere but in music” (182). Jean Alexander, Harvena Richter, Avrom Fleishman, and Patricia Laurence (*The Reading of Silence*) all rely on musical analogies to focus readers on Woolf’s use of rhythm. More specifically, Sonita Sarker argues that the novelistic strategies of *Between the Acts* parallel “Schoenbergian sprechstimme [sic], atonality and dissonance” (159), whereas Nora Eisenberg suggests that music in *Between the Acts* “comes to stand for a variety of non-verbal forms which Woolf hopes might supplement a failing language” (259). Of all of Woolf’s novels, *The Waves* is particularly susceptible to musical analysis: Marguerite Yourcenar, in the preface to her French translation of the novel, writes that the
compelling reasons—biographical and otherwise—to take such an approach. Woolf was not a musical performer herself, but musical references in her letters, essays, diary entries, and her fiction all support the idea that Woolf was a self-educated music lover, who thought carefully about the musical works she heard, and particularly, their effect upon the creative mind. Writing in her diary about an upcoming concert in 1924, for instance, she notes: “its [sic] music I want; to stimulate & suggest” (1 November 1924: Diary 2: 320). Moreover, from her descriptions in the early letters of the pleasure she and her siblings derived from “playing” their newly acquired pianola,¹⁵⁴ to her choice to cast her first novelistic heroine as a pianist, to her later letters to Ethel Smyth,¹⁵⁵ in which she imagines her friend’s compositional process, a picture emerges of Woolf the writer, attempting, throughout her life, to experience—if secondhand, vicariously—the musician’s creative process.

It is in her early, youthful writings that Woolf most passionately articulates the power of music, characterizing it in “Street Music” (1905), for instance, in terms strongly reminiscent of Nietzsche’s Dionysian formulation. And in an oft-quoted passage from a construction of the work recalls The Art of the Fugue (qtd. in Vegh 67); Gerald Levin argues that it borrows its contrapuntal style from Beethoven, but moves towards the pantonality of Schoenberg; Schulze too uses The Waves to demonstrate an “ideological similarity between Woolf’s and Schoenberg’s work” (19); and Elicia Clements argues the similarities between the “six subjectivities which inhabit The Waves” and the six movements of a late Beethoven string quartet (“Transforming Musical Sounds” 162, 168).

¹⁵⁴ The Stephenses bought a player piano in September 1902. One month later, Virginia Stephens writes to Emma Vaughan: “The Pianola is flourishing, and plays after dinner till the other side (the Mackenzies, who only do hand playing) are vanquished. Really it is a wonderful machine—beyond a machine in that it lets your own soul flow thro” (October 1902; Passionate Apprentice 57). Even more than a year later, the Pianola had not lost its novelty: “A fresh lot of tunes came today chosen by Adrian and a very mixed set—Bach and Schumann and the Washington Post, and the Dead March in Saul, and Pinafore and the Messiah” (Virginia Stephens to Emma Vaughan, 24 July 1903; Passionate Apprentice 88).

¹⁵⁵ In a letter to Smyth, she probes: “Are you writing? How does one write music?” before imagining “Dame Ethel Smyth . . . being in a hurricane today, putting in trumpets, cello’s [sic] and a trombone or two in the bass. She thumps it out on her piano; and is only roused to life by her dog; does she ever eat her dinner, or is it always cold?” (22 April 1930; Letters 3: 159-60).
letter to Emma Vaughan, the young Virginia Stephen describes the power of music in terms that are equal parts playful and ecstatic:

The only thing in this world is music—music and books and one or two pictures.

I am going to found a colony where there shall be no marrying—unless you happen to fall in love with a symphony of Beethoven—no human element at all, except what comes through Art—nothing but ideal peace and endless meditation.

(23 April 1901; *Passionate Apprentice* 41-2)

As I will discuss, Woolf’s move away from the valorization of absolute music and Wagnerian opera in her later novels qualifies this early exuberant attitude toward music, but even as her understanding of music and art matured, she never did abandon the intense interest in music that her youthful language in this passage implies; the particular allure that music offers was a subject that held her interest until her death. In one of her last letters to Smyth, for instance, she toys with a new, explicitly musical, project:

Now let us talk of something interesting. I was going to say why dont [sic] you write a Common Reader review of music? Now consider that. Write your loves and hates for Bach Wagner etc out in plain English. I have an ulterior motive. I want to investigate the influence of music on literature. But there’s not a book on music that gives me a hint—Parry all padding. What about Tovey? Too metaphysical. (6 December 1940; *Letters* 6: 450)

Given the references to her own *Common Reader*, as well as the books by Sir Hubert Parry and Sir Donald Tovey—*Art of Music* (1894) and *Essays in Musical Analysis* (1935-8), respectively—Woolf seems here to be discussing the possibility of exploring her ideas about music in a critical, nonfiction work, the one avenue she had not yet explored. She
had already consciously experimented with the literary appropriation of musical form, most notably in the structure of Roger Fry. Replying to Elizabeth Trevelyan, who had praised Roger Fry, just three months prior to the above letter to Smyth, Woolf notes:

You have found out exactly what I was trying to do when you compare it to a piece of music. Its [sic] odd, for I’m not regularly musical, but I always think of my books as music before I write them. And especially with the life of Roger,—there was such a mass of detail that the only way I could hold it together was by abstracting it into themes. I did try to state them in the first chapter, and then to bring in developments and variations, and then to make them all heard together and end by bringing back the first theme in the last chapter. (4 September 1940; Letters 6: 425-6)

For many critics, Woolf’s “musical” description of the structure of Roger Fry is a quintessential summation of the musicality of her writing; indeed, when upon Woolf’s death R. C. Trevelyan was asked to write a short notice of Woolf for the Abinger Chronicle, he asked Leonard if he could quote from the above passage, claiming that the quotation “would help what I wanted to say very much” (20 April 1941; qtd. in Oldfield 94). But while many of the musical analyses of Woolf’s fiction are founded on Woolf’s perceived literary appropriation of musical form—a perception borne out by Woolf’s words in this passage—it is undoubtedly the increasing aurality of Woolf’s later fiction—her increased attention to sound and rhythm—that is the impetus for the sustained critical use of musical analogy to explain Woolf’s literary innovations. As recent work on Woolf and sound by Melba Cuddy-Keane (“Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality,” “Modernist Soundscape and the Intelligent Ear”), Rishona Zimring (“The Art
of Sound in *The Years*”), Garrett Stewart (in *Reading Voices*), and Angela Frattarola (“Listening for ‘Found Sound’ Samples in the Novels of Virginia Woolf”) has highlighted, Woolf’s fiction, particularly from *The Waves* (1931) on, demonstrates “a heightened sense of the aural” (Frattarola 134), “coincident,” in Cuddy-Keane’s formulation, “with the emergence of the gramophone and the wireless” (“Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies” 71). Though these essays do not speak to the specific influence of opera or the use of operatic strategies in Woolf’s fiction, they do offer an important recognition of the work of listening that sets up my own examination of *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*.

I concentrated above on the “musical” analyses of Woolf’s fiction because they are important background—indeed, a necessary foil—to my focus on the operatic elements in *The Waves*. Woolf’s fiction, when it is described in musical terms, is typically analyzed as evidence of her strictly formalist, closed, autotelic literary project. Indeed, Daniel C. Melnick’s attack on Woolf’s class-consciousness links Woolf’s particular use of music to her ultimate failure as a modernist:

Yet Woolf’s overt idealization of music as a Paterian, finally mythic solace and escape, clashes profoundly with the distress of consciousness her musicalized narratives covertly and actually reveal. Her fictional project is affected by a lack of awareness of its own promised power; the potential outpourings of consciousness—Bernard’s and the others’, or in the Joyce-influenced *Mrs. Dalloway* Clarissa’s and Septimus’s—are partly blocked by the restraints of her class-bound range and narrative sensibility and by the self-deception or at least
confusion in her essential narrative strategy: Woolf would valorize a mannered aesthetic harmony which in actuality has vanished from her time and art. (103-4)

Also taking a Paterian approach—though certainly, less caustically—Mark Hussey speaks of the musical references in *The Voyage Out* and *The Waves* in terms of “synaesthesia” (*Singing* 64); for him, Woolf’s use of “[a]n art that expresses meaning and feeling without using referential signs” is symptomatic of her more general philosophical orientation toward “the numinous” (*Singing* 66). Adding further support for Melnick’s accusation that the power of Woolf’s fiction is negatively restricted by her narrow worldview, Aaron Aronson, focusing on the similarity of the intimacy of Woolf’s writing and the intimacy of chamber music, writes: “Virginia Woolf’s predilection for chamber music characterizes much of her writing. Her novels and stories possess the intimacy and close texture of a small number of instruments playing in unison” (240). Because Woolf was an avid concertgoer, it would be incorrect to deny the importance of chamber music, or more generally, absolute music, in Woolf’s writing (though, as Phillips notes, what Aronson means by “a small number of instruments playing in unison” is unclear; “Re(de)composing the Novel” 121). In 1921, for instance, Woolf attended a Beethoven Festival Week at which the London String Quartet played all 16 quartets, as well as the Opus 133 “Grosse Fuge.” “[E]very afternoon for a week,” she details in her diary, “I’ve been up to the Æolian Hall; taken my seat right at the back; put my bag on the floor & listened to Beethoven quartets. Do I dare say listened? Well, but if one gets a lot of pleasure, really divine pleasure, & knows the tunes, & only occasionally thinks of other things—surely I may say listened” (29 April 1921; *Diary* 2: 114). Given Woolf’s thorough exposure to the Beethoven quartets, Elicia Clements’s compelling analysis of
the “model of six intertwined subjectivities” of *The Waves* as analogous to “the arrangement of Beethoven’s String Quartet” (op. 130) has much evidence—biographical and otherwise—to recommend it. And of course Woolf did also write a short story titled “The String Quartet” that takes a Mozart string quartet as its thematic guide.

But the later fiction, particularly *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*, is equally saturated with operatic references—just as the diaries and essays and letters are—that have yet to be taken into account;\(^\text{156}\) when they are, they reveal a literary project antithetical to Melnick’s portrait of a cloistered Woolf, writing within a narrow framework, ignorant of an audience outside of her own coterie and blind to the collapsed world around her. As I will argue, the progress of Woolf’s fiction in fact demonstrates a move away from the common use of music as a trope for that which transcends language (which we see in her early descriptions of music in the letters, diaries, and especially *The Voyage Out*\(^\text{157}\) and “Street Music”), and a move toward a distinctly modern use of operatic strategies to discount not only the myth of music’s singular ability to transcend, to unify, etc., but also to denounce the importance of the value which underlies that myth.

In this move, we witness her concomitant critique of Wagner, whose music-dominated

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\(^{156}\) Clements links the operatic allusions that help to characterize Rhoda to the fifth movement of op. 130, the *Cavatina*, where, as she writes, “Beethoven imports an operatic genre and manner into the string quartet” (“Transforming Musical Sounds” 172). While the *Cavatina* is notable for its lyricism, and Clements’s analysis of the way in which the “beklemmt” section of the quartet mirrors Rhoda’s own feelings of anxiety is interesting, it seems to me a stretch to use this movement to account for the pervasive operatic allusions in *The Waves*. The *cantabile* quality of this movement aside, the instrumental “voice” hardly mimics an operatic “ah,” to use Rhoda’s word; as Clements herself notes, “[t]he texture of the *Cavatina* tends to avoid the typical scenario for an overriding solo-voice by shifting constantly from the top voice to the other voices and vice versa” (172). This “unsingable” texture is characteristic of Beethoven, and is one of the reasons he is not typically linked with opera (he wrote only one, *Fidelio*): his musical oeuvre is, unlike Mozart’s, strongly influenced by a distinctly symphonic, not operatic, sensibility. Furthermore, explaining the operatic moments in Rhoda’s soliloquies by way of analogy to this movement alone silences the strong Wagnerian references throughout the text.

\(^{157}\) For an excellent discussion of Woolf’s use of music in *The Voyage Out*, see Emma Sutton, “‘Within a Space of Tears’: Music, Writing, and the Modern in Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*.”
(and musically dominating) operas reflect a nineteenth-century, Paterian, idealization of music. Rather than prize the Wagnerian ideal of unity, Woolf exploits the inherent “impurity” of opera by questioning the assumption of music’s transcendence and power, and in the process, challenges, expands, and transforms novelistic form.

**Virginia Woolf, Richard Wagner, and the Opera House**

In a 1923 letter to Barbara Bagenal, Woolf makes a very revealing comment about her early relationship to the world of opera: “I went to Tristan the other night; but the love making bored me. When I was your age I thought it the most beautiful thing in the world—or was it only in deference to Saxon? I told many lies in Covent Garden Opera house. My youth was largely spent there. And we used to write the names of operas in books. But I must not write the whole history of my life” (8 July 1923; *Letters* 2: 56). A search for the word “opera” in Woolf’s early letters certainly bears out Woolf’s observation—“My youth was largely spent there”—but what most interests me about this passage is her reflection on the change in the way in which opera now affects her,

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158 Like so many of her contemporaries, Woolf was interested in Pater: in a 1905 diary entry, for instance, she notes: “Out to Hatchards to buy Stevenson & Pater—I want to study them—not to copy, I hope, but to see how the trick’s done. Stevenson is a trick—but Pater something different and beyond” (*Passionate Apprentice* 251). But as Perry Meisel notes, although she studied with Pater’s sister Clara and undoubtedly knew his works, and, according to Meisel, borrows “particular figures of speech . . . from decisive moments in Pater’s own vision,” Pater is curiously absent as a subject in her critical writings, which for me suggests her discomfort with his distinctly nineteenth-century, or as Woolf might say, “Victorian,” philosophical approach, rather than the dialectic of “repression and anxiety” that Meisel argues for (*Absent Father* xiii).

159 Consider the following excerpts, all from Virginia Stephens’s early letters:

I cant come on Monday or Wednesday as we go to the Opera both nights. Couldn’t I come some other day? (Violet Dickinson, 3 May 1907; *Letters* 1: 293)

We go almost nightly to the opera, and in the afternoon we have our German. (Violet Dickinson, 13 May 1908; *Letters* 1: 331)

Could you come to tea with me on Thursday? I have got so miserably involved in opera and the German language that that seems to be the only free afternoon, but it would be delightful if you could come then. (Lytton Strachey, 18 May 1908; *Letters* 1: 333)

We are just back half dazed from the opera—six solid hours of it—and if it were properly edited one might get through in 30 minutes. (Lytton Strachey, 9 February 1909; *Letters* 1: 384)
and the way she relates this change to her own maturation. The reference to Tristan und Isolde, as well as to Saxon Sydney-Turner, who accompanied her to Bayreuth in 1909, suggests that by “opera” Woolf was thinking of Wagner, which is unsurprising given Wagner’s profound influence, not only on her, but also on modernist art and artists in general.160

Woolf had a complicated relationship to Wagner, but a relationship nevertheless characterized by an almost magnetic, if at times unwilling, attraction to his operas. In 1909, when Woolf wrote “Impressions at Bayreuth” for The Times, it had been 27 years since Wagner premiered his last opera, Parsifal, at Bayreuth. He could no longer be considered a revolutionary; as I discussed in the introduction, with Salome, Strauss had already usurped Wagner’s claim to that position, and yet neither was Wagner “old news.” Parsifal, in particular, held a kind of cachet of “newness” because of the ban on performances of it outside of Bayreuth, which lasted until 1903, when it was performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. But in Europe, performances were prohibited until the centenary of Wagner’s birth, in 1913. Practically speaking, then, for an English operagoer in 1909 who had not made the journey to Bayreuth, Parsifal was as “new” to the ear as was Strauss’s Salome, which perhaps explains Woolf’s opening remarks in “Impressions at Bayreuth,” which acknowledge the difficulty of, as well as the liberation in, judging “new music” (Essays 1: 288). Woolf’s earliest impressions of Parsifal, contained in letters to Vanessa Bell, indicate a profound admiration for the “mysterious emotional work” (8 August 1909; Letters 1: 404); “I expect,” she remarks after a second

160 With the major exception of James Joyce, I would agree with Joy Calico’s assertion that it was a “modernist tendency to take a rather simplistic interpretation of Richard Wagner’s music drama as representative of all opera” (4).
hearing, “it is the most remarkable of the operas” (12 August 1909; Letters 1: 406). This opinion is crystallized in The Times article (which appears just eight days later), where Woolf, moonlighting as a music reviewer, compares Wagner’s genius to Shakespeare’s: “Parsifal seems poured out in a smooth stream at white heat; its shape is solid and entire. . . . It is the only work which has no incongruous associations” (Essays 1: 290).

By 1913, however, Woolf is less enamored of Wagner’s accomplishment, characterizing the unity she earlier praised in terms that now suggest excess, and resolving not to partake of it again:

We came up here 10 days ago to attend the Ring—and I hereby state that I will never go again, and you must help us both to keep to that. My eyes are bruised, my ears dulled, my brain a mere pudding of pulp—O the noise and the heat, and the bawling sentimentality, which used once to carry me away, and now leaves me sitting perfectly still. Everyone seems to have come to this opinion, though some pretend to believe still. (Woolf to Katherine Cox, 16 May 1913; Letters 2: 26-27)

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161 The portion of the 12 August 1909 letter that describes the second Parsifal performance she heard reads in full: “We heard Parsifal yesterday; it was much better done, and I felt within a space of tears. I expect it is the most remarkable of the operas; it slides from music to words almost imperceptibly. However, I have been niggling at the effect all the morning, without much success” (Letters 1: 406-7).

162 As in her letters to Vanessa, Woolf’s prose in the published review is rife with praise:
Somehow Wagner has conveyed the desire of the Knights of the Grail in such a way that the intense emotion of human beings is combined with the unearthly nature of the thing they seek. . . . Again, feelings of this kind that are equally diffused and felt for one object in common create an impression of largeness and, when the music is played as it was played on the night of the 11th, of an overwhelming unity. The Grail seems to burn through all superincumbencies; the music is intimate in a sense that none other is; one is fired with emotion yet possessed with tranquility at the same time, for the words are continued by the music so that we hardly notice the transition. (Essays 1: 289)
Granted, as Woolf herself reveals in the last line, by this time, it was already becoming less in vogue to be so uncritically enamored of Wagner. As Joy Calico astutely notes in her discussion of the centrality of Wagner to Brecht’s understanding of opera, to grapple with Wagner’s overwhelming influence is a kind of artistic rite of passage:

\[\text{[f]lirtation with and ultimate rejection of Wagner was a hallmark of modernism, but it certainly had ample precedent. Since the 1870s, recovering Wagnerians have been almost as numerous as practicing disciples. Each new generation of disillusioned devotees reads Nietzsche’s}\ \textit{The Case of Wagner} \text{and}\ \textit{Nietzsche contra Wagner} \text{as the first step in recovery, taking some cold comfort in the knowledge that even Nietzsche was bamboozled by endlessly unresolved chromatic harmony, perpetual melody, and the confluence of the arts into the mishmash of the}\ \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk}. \text{In the years surrounding World War I, artists chose sides, either consciously cleaving to the Wagnerian tradition or actively seeking alternatives. (2)}\]

While we have no evidence that Woolf’s “recovery” involved reading Nietzsche, the process through which she modifies the Wagnerian aesthetic in \textit{The Waves} eventually expresses itself, as we shall see in the discussion of \textit{Between the Acts}, in a reconceptualization of the possibilities of \textit{opera as social text} that is markedly similar to Brecht’s subversive (ab)use of the genre. In the letter to Katherine Cox, however,

\[\text{163 In} \textit{Music After the Great War (1915)} \text{Van Vechten reiterates this position, though ascribing a different reason for it: “it should be apparent to anyone but the oldest inhabitant that the music dramas of Richard Wagner are aging rapidly. Public interest in them is on the decline, thanks to an absurd recognition, in some degree or other, everywhere from Bayreuth to Paris, from Madrid to New York, of what is known as the ‘Master’s tradition’” (6-7), by which he means the obsessive focus on maintaining Wagner’s original intentions with regard to every aspect of the production.}\]
Woolf’s critique is of the bombast and sentimentality of the operas, the perceived lack of authentic emotional effect. For Woolf, Wagner’s prized Gesamtkunstwerk is a critical ailment both because it acts like a doping agent, turning the brain into a “mere pudding of pulp,” and because its assumption of music’s transcendent power, so easily transformed into “bawling sentimentality,” limits one’s critical engagement with the work.

But of course, Woolf does not stick to her resolution, as a later letter to Barbara Benegal, for one, makes clear. And as a letter to Smyth indicates, once listening to opera on the wireless became a possibility, Woolf found herself at war with Wagner even while in the comfort of her own home: “the loudspeaker is pouring forth Wagner from Paris. His rhythm destroys my rhythm; yes, thats a true description. All writing is nothing but putting words on the backs of rhythm. If they fall off the rhythm one’s done— . . . Thank God, Wagner has stopped murmuring among the forest leaves, and I’m my own mistress again” (7 April 1931; Letters 4: 303-5). As irritated as Woolf appears to be made by Wagner’s inescapable intrusion into her writerly voice (which breaks her “rhythm”), she yet listens, as if compelled by the same force she identifies in “Street Music”: “[i]t is because [music] is . . . inborn in us that we can never silence music, any more than we can stop our heart from beating” (Essays 1: 30). Aside from any mystic power it might hold over us, the problem with music or sound more generally, as Cuddy-

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164 See also her 31 May 1925 letter to Saxon Sydney-Turner, where she indicates a similar exhaustion with, yet undeniable magnetic attraction to, Wagner:

I have been to the Walküre, and to Lords: at both places I looked for you in vain. . . . Walküre completely triumphed, I thought; except for some boredom—I can’t ever enjoy those long arguments in music—when it is obviously mere conversation upon business matters between Wotan and Brunhilde [sic]: however, the rest was superb. The fire is terrible: I saw at once that it was made of red silk, and that used to be done quite satisfactorily. Also I missed the ride of the horses. Still, when all is said, we were completely exhausted, and had to go to bed early last night to recover (Letters 3: 186).
Keane and others have pointed out, is that one cannot, as with visual stimulants, simply look away; one cannot shut one’s ears (“Modernist Soundscapes” 388). Sound does intrude; it permeates its atmosphere like a scent, even when the act of listening is unconscious (or when one is merely hearing, which implies passivity, as opposed to the active pursuit of listening). That said, given that Woolf could have turned the wireless off (presuming Leonard was not also listening), the anecdote is a telling reflection of the concomitant attraction and repulsion that she felt toward Wagnerian opera.

Clearly Woolf never did reject outright Wagner’s operas, but she did, in both The Waves and Between the Acts, question and critique the values underlying what I will interpret as Wagner’s essentially anti-operatic aesthetic stance. To understand, then, why I consider Woolf’s explicit rejection of the Wagnerian aesthetic in these novels evidence of a narrative driven by a fundamentally operatic perspective, it is necessary to show first how Wagner’s project is ultimately motivated by the conviction, as borne out in the Musikdramas, that music is the supreme art, and second, how this conviction actually reflects an essentially anti-operatic bias—a bias that Woolf’s late fiction, like the works of her musical contemporary Richard Strauss, would challenge. In Wagner’s quest to create Gesamtkunstwerk opera, he ironically privileged the condition of absolute music; that is, he strove to make an aesthetic musical whole out of the various disparate components of opera. As Woolf writes in “The Opera,” one problem with the music in opera is that it “raises associations which are incongruous with the associations raised by another art; the effort to resolve them into one clear conception is painful, and the mind is constantly woken and disillusioned” (Essays 1: 270). But in Woolf’s estimation, in Wagnerian opera this incongruence is dissipated “because the emotions are emphasized
by the music” (thus also accounting for its popularity; *Essays* 1: 270). If opera “slides from music to words almost imperceptibly,” as Woolf describes *Parsifal* (*Letters* 1: 406), and there is no incongruence—even difference—between the work of opera’s component parts, then it becomes possible for the music not to be sullied by the extra-musical artistic “intrusions” of the words and drama. Thus though opera will always have a program (and in this way, be the antithesis of absolute music), it can also so overwhelm one with its unity that it becomes music alone—and music, in so many aesthetic theories (notably Pater’s, but also Schopenhauer’s), is the highest of all art forms because it expresses that which language cannot: as Woolf herself writes early in her career, “its [music’s] statements have all the majesty of a generalization, and yet contain our private emotions” (*Essays* 1: 291). Seen—or heard, rather—in this perspective, *Gesamtkunstwerk* opera, making as it does words into music, drama into music, narrative into music, can be considered less as opera, and more as a kind of “supernumerary” absolute music.¹⁶⁵

It is in this respect that the new operas of the twentieth century, particularly Strauss’s early modernist operas, *Salome* and *Elektra*, most differ from their Wagnerian precedents. Strauss was of course still working within a melodic, harmonic, and orchestral framework strongly influenced by Wagner, and yet there is a fundamental

¹⁶⁵ This is a complex point, partly because what Wagner said in his essays and what he did in his operas do not neatly correspond. To be clear, I am here talking about the effect of Wagner’s operas in practical performance. Without a doubt, my reading of his operas as ersatz absolute music directly contradicts Wagner’s early theorization (before he had composed *The Ring* and studied Schopenhauer) in “Opera and Drama” (1851) that drama, not music, should predominate in opera. But the reality of his operas, as Suzanne Langer points out, is that “no opera is more unmistakably music and not drama.” As she continues to note, while the music of his operas can often stand on its own, independent of its dramatic contexts, the thought of mounting any of his libretti as plays is (as is the case with most libretti) preposterous. Wagner’s “music drama is not the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the work-of-all-arts, which he had projected in his theory, but a work of music, like all the ‘reprehensible’ operas that went before it” (161). Moreover, according to the “principle of assimilation” that Langer identifies, his operas are destined to stay music because when non-musical elements are “musically used,” they “become musical elements” (166).
difference between the two composers that distinguishes Strauss not only from Wagner, but also from his other modernist contemporaries. As Charles Youmans observes, unlike the technical advances made by the most radical musical modernists of the twentieth century,

Strauss’s revolution targeted something different: a widespread and generally accepted nineteenth-century aesthetic that survived the otherwise jarring transition from the era of Wagner and Brahms to that of Schoenberg. This defining musical preconception, so all-pervading that Strauss represented his culture’s only significant dissenting voice, was the conviction that music had unique transcendental powers. (4)

The “desacrilization of music,” which for Youmans characterizes Strauss’s aesthetic orientation, is at complete odds not only with Wagnerian ideals, but also with Schoenberg’s “modernist agenda”: “With his turn away from programmatic music to ‘absolute’ genres . . . Schoenberg embraced the cause of musical autonomy, a view that was rapidly becoming the dominant force in musical aesthetics precisely because it could support metaphysical expectations that seemed hopelessly outdated in the context of programmatic music or opera” (5). The “invading” literary text in both program music and opera complicates notions of music’s metaphysical transcendence, which is why Wagner worked so hard to unify the literary text—in essence, to make the non-musical operatic elements “music” so that it could remain an autonomous work of art.

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166 While “absoluteness” does not necessarily entail a belief in music’s metaphysical transcendence, against the backdrop of the nineteenth-century program music versus absolute music debate, which clearly contextualizes this issue, “absoluteness” is an aesthetic stance inextricably linked to the Schopenhauerian privileging of music.
Strauss’s exploitation of opera’s inherent *disunity* represents a radical departure from the aesthetic value of music championed by writers like Pater and composers like Wagner. Rather than attempt to subvert, in Nielsen’s terms, the “monsters” created from the “most absurd conglomeration” of music and words in programmatic music (of which opera might be said to be the ultimate example) by striving for the ideal of unity represented by Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* (27), Strauss consciously played upon the discrepancies between music and words in his operas, indeed using it as the structuring argument of his metaoperatic last opera, *Capriccio*. It is not that Strauss agrees or disagrees with what Nielsen considers the erroneous assumption that “words and music can combine as intimately as silver and gold” (28), but that the lack of the Wagnerian impetus to make opera’s nonmusical parts “music” in order to preserve the work’s aesthetic autonomy makes either side of the argument *irrelevant*, since Strauss refuses music its transcendental status and so embraces opera’s “unnatural” alchemy—what Woolf identifies as the “painful” incongruence of opera’s musical and dramatic, or literary, texts. Given the strength of the Wagnerian intertext running through *The Waves*, Woolf’s positive assessment of Strauss’s *Salome*, which she saw in Dresden after the festival at Bayreuth, is telling, not only for the way that she sets up Wagner and Strauss in opposition to one another, but also for the attraction to Strauss’s deliberately “impure” techniques the statement reveals. Describing the opera to her sister Vanessa, she

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167 It is worth noting that in spite of his vituperative language in this article, in practice, Nielsen was evidently conflicted on this matter: he wrote two operas as well as a catalogue of incidental music, many with clearly programmatic titles.

168 My discussion of *The Waves* will centre on Woolf’s engagement with Wagnerian aesthetics; I bring up Strauss here only to demonstrate how twentieth-century composers challenged Wagner’s philosophical argument. But many critics have looked to twentieth-century music to explain Woolf’s formal method (Cuddy-Keane, Laurence, Levin, Sarker, Schulze), despite there being only a “web of probability rather
remarks: “I was much excited, and believe that it [Salome] is a new discovery. He
[Strauss] gets great emotion into his music, without any beauty. However, Saxon thought
we were encroaching upon Wagner, and we had a long and rather acid discussion” (24
August 1909; Letters 1: 410).

**Wagner in The Waves**

Several critics have commented upon the Wagnerian intertexts in *The Waves*.¹⁶⁹

And indeed, there are some very strong parallels beyond the obvious Percival/Parsifal

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¹⁶⁹ William Blissett’s article, “Wagnerian Fiction in English” (1963), was the first to underscore Woolf’s indebtedness to Wagner, calling *The Waves* “the most Wagnerian of Virginia Woolf’s novels because the most despotically organized, the most ‘composite’ in its use of musical and painterly, even sculpturesque and ballet-like effects, and the most pervasively leitmotivistic in it structure and symbolism: the waves play an endless melody” (257). But the article, which traces Wagnerian influences in a number of twentieth-century novelists, never develops the point further. Fromm makes the general comparison between the way in which “Wagner uses melodic phrases over and over again” and Virginia Woolf’s “use of phrases and images over and over in different contexts . . . producing the extraordinary effects that we have come to experience in Wagner” (181). Taking a different approach, John DiGaetani also argues that “Wagner’s influence on The Waves . . . is pervasive,” but unlike Blissett, DiGaetani highlights the thematic importance of Wagner in *The Waves*. His conclusion, however, that the Wagnerian intertexts give *The Waves* “a mythic dimension that it would otherwise lack,” misses the ways in which Woolf uses the intertexts to critique Wagnerian philosophy. Like DiGaetani, Tracey Sherard also notes the thematic relation between the character, Percival, and Wagner’s *Parsifal*, but then takes the analysis in a different direction, arguing that Woolf uses “the leitmotif in order to signify the characters’ ongoing struggle with the oppressive discourses of gender by which they are interpolated—discourses for which the character of Percival serves as a sort of ‘spool’” (62). Phillips’s thesis, that in *The Waves*, Woolf’s, like Wagner’s, “play with the infirmity of structure enables her to work to leave the confines of genre and to question the limitations of language” (“Re(de)composing the Novel” 120) is, in its conclusion, the work most in sympathy with mine, although Phillips does not, as I do, see Woolf’s use of Wagner as a conscious, sustained critique of Wagnerian aesthetics.
The first italicized passage in *The Waves* thematically recalls the overture to the prologue to the *Ring* cycle, *Das Rheingold*. Like the musical depiction of the creation of the world—the incremental movement from a single low E flat to the glorious arpeggiated Rhein theme—that Wagner uses to set up and parallel the cycle’s narrative, Woolf’s opening section uses a poetic description of the cyclic nature of the natural environment—the sea begins and ends “indistinguishable from the sky” (3)—to set up the extraordinary “play-poem idea” that is *The Waves* (18 June 1927, *Diary* 3: 139). And like the “remarkably simple” Rhein theme that recurs in *The Ring*, as Wagner explains, “with constantly changing implications, with almost every other motive in the course of the drama” (*Wagner’s Aesthetics* 52), and which “creates the impression of large-scale formal coherence” (Darcy 97), the rhythm in Woolf’s opening passage also sets up the poetic rhythm of the subsequent italicized passages, which tie together the disjointed soliloquies that comprise the narrative. Further emphasizing this immediate connection between Wagner’s *Ring* and Woolf’s *The Waves* are the first spoken words of the novel: Bernard’s opening line, “I see a ring” (5).

Beyond the thematic parallels supporting the claim that Wagner serves as an important intertext in *The Waves*, there are also clear structural parallels that suggest a specifically Wagnerian intertext. In a sense, *The Waves* is most Wagnerian in its

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170 For DiGaetani, the strongest evidence that “it is Wagner’s Parsifal that is being referred to in the novel and not Malory’s or even Jessie Weston’s” is Bernard’s allusion to the “wild hunting song” that he ascribes to Percival, a clear reference to the hunting music to which Parsifal enters in the opera (123).

171 As DiGaetani points out: “[t]he symbolic combination of water with predawn darkness suggests both death and rebirth, which is very similar to Wagner’s use of light and water in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*” (118).

172 DiGaetani, for one, has pointed out the pervasive ring imagery throughout the novel (119-20).
“cannibalism,” to paraphrase Woolf in “Poetry, Fiction and the Future,” its attempt to incorporate poetry, drama, and music in the novelistic equivalent of the total work of art:

The idea has come to me that what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea. Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don’t belong to the moment; this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional. Why admit any thing to literature that is not poetry—by which I mean saturated? Is that not my grudge against novels—that they select nothing? The poets succeeding by simplifying; practically everything is left out. I want to put practically everything in; yet to saturate. That is what I want to do in The Moths. It must include nonsense, fact, sordidity: but made transparent. (28 November 1928; Diary 3: 209-10)

In Woolf’s language, we read the desire for a hybrid genre, a genre that uses the tools of poetry but enjoys the comprehensiveness of the novel: “I want to put practically everything in; yet to saturate.” The entry recalls Forster’s characterization of Woolf as “a poet, who wants to write something as near to a novel as possible” (18). But in calling her novel a “play-poem,” and in asserting elsewhere that she is “writing The Waves to a rhythm not to a plot” (2 September 1930; Diary 3: 316), Woolf indicates that she is after something much more inclusive—more omnivorous—than a poetic novel, something, in
short, that “overflow[s] the limits of genre” (Guiget 249). Unlike Wagner’s “total work of art,” however, Woolf’s “saturat[jon] of every atom” does not privilege unity at the expense of difference. Her aim is “to give the moment whole” and “to put practically everything in.” As she writes later, her achievement in The Waves will be in the creation of a work that is “a saturated, unchopped, completeness; changes of scene, of mood, of person, done without spilling a drop” (30 December 1930; Diary 3: 343).

The basic premise of The Waves worked itself out early. In one of the earliest descriptions of what would become The Waves, Woolf gives a sketch of the yet-to-be written novel: “Yet I am now & then haunted by some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; & time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident—say the fall of a flower—might contain it” (23 November 1926; Diary 3: 118). Echoes of the cyclic theme of the Ring cycle (perhaps a version that replaces the patriarchal Siegfried with a female hero) abound in her language (“time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past”) which on the whole accords fairly well with the final product, particularly if one argues, as many do, including Woolf herself, that the six consciousnesses represent the life of one person. But the sjuhzet—the how of the

173 When Woolf spoke about the project in her diaries and letters, she consistently noted that she was attempting something entirely new. Noting that she was “bored by narrative,” and thus “not trying to tell a story,” Woolf sought to create a novel in a new form (28 March 1929, 28 May 1929; Diary 3: 219, 229). Variously identifying the work in its early stages as a “play-poem,” “a continuous stream,” autobiography (28 May 1929; Diary 3: 229), and “an entirely new kind of book” (Woolf/Quentin Bell 20 March 1929; Letters 4: 35), Woolf strenuously rejected, even more radically than she had in her earlier works, the traditional narrative form of the novel. “[N]ever, in my life, did I attack such a vague yet elaborate design,” she wrote of the work in its early stages (11 October 1929; Diary 3: 259).

174 After completing The Waves, Woolf wrote, “I think I have kept starkly & ascetically to the plan” (29 April 1930; Diary 3: 302). To G. L. Dickinson, Woolf wrote, “But I did mean that in some vague way we are the same person, and not separate people. The six characters were supposed to be one” (27 October
novel—came much more slowly; indeed, the difficulty of finding a way out of the traditional novel form was almost debilitating at times: “never have I screwed my brain so tight over a book” (2 February 1931; Diary 4: 8).\footnote{175} Writing to Smyth while trying to finish the novel, Woolf noted: “[i]ts [sic] not the writing of the Waves that takes the time, but the architecture” (7 July 1931; Letters 4: 354). Seeking “some device which is not a trick,” Woolf struggled to find a formal solution adequate to her task (25 September 1929; Diary 3: 257).

When Woolf wrote that she was seeking this device, she was speaking specifically about the way in which she would narrate the novel. “Who thinks it?” she asked, “And am I outside the thinker?” (25 September 1929; Diary 3: 257). In the end, Woolf opted for a technique (the soliloquy) that seems to have its origins in the theatre and yet is distinctly anti-theatrical in its effect. As Jean Guiget writes, “[o]ne has only to open the book to realize immediately that the label ‘play’ seems equally unjustified [as the label ‘novel’]” (281)—though Katie Mitchell’s 2006 multi-media stage adaptation of the novel at the National Theatre (London) did meet with great critical acclaim, one critic suggesting that Mitchell, like the author of her source text, had “created an entirely new art form” (Gardner).\footnote{176} While the waves interludes might be read as stage directions,

\footnote{175} Even after the book was completed, Woolf was not convinced that she had truly succeeded in her task, telling Clive Bell and Hugh Walpole that the book was “a failure” (21 February 1931, 12 April 1931; Letters 4: 294, 311); remarking to Quentin Bell that she had “finished the worst novel in the language” (11 April 1931; Letters 4: 310); and describing the novel to Vanessa Bell as “that awful bad dull book The Waves or Moths” (12 April 1931; Letters 4: 310).

\footnote{176} The Waves, in spite of Woolf calling it a play-poem, is a curiously anti-theatrical text. Neville seems to see himself, at least at one point, as an actor in a play in which the people around him “play their parts infallibly . . . and wait for the moment when they speak the word that must have been written” (163), but, within the text, his utterances have no audience. Aside from the public of Bernard’s biographer, imagined in his first reference, “I am here quoting my own biographer” (61); remembered in his second, “Once I had
ways of setting the scene, the action that occurs in between the interludes is anti-theatrical in that very little action is represented, particularly, as I will note later, between characters; rather, “each character speaks in a kind of recitative, recording an individual current of subjective thought” in seeming isolation of the other characters’ soliloquies (Holtby 190). The result is a work supremely concerned with voices, leaving, as Laurence writes, “the reader not only with the perception of individual minds but also with a sense of the opera of this novel” (The Reading of Silence 202).\footnote{177}

Interestingly, these voices, which are echoed in the repeated descriptions of the birds’ “passionate songs” in the italicized passages (122), are distinguished not by their individual rhythms (read out of context, one character’s voice could easily be interchanged for another) but by the lexical meanings of the texts recited, by the specificity of the thematic leitmotifs associated with each character. The structural use of the leitmotif is not unique to The Waves; think, for instance, of Charles Tansley’s comment that becomes Lily’s haunting refrain in To the Lighthouse: “women can’t paint, women can’t write” (130). But in The Waves, the technique is carefully sustained and more subtly employed than in Woolf’s earlier novels.\footnote{178} Jinny’s most pervasive leitmotif, a biographer, dead long since, but if he still followed my footsteps with his old flattering intensity he would here say” (216), there is little sense of an audience in the text until Bernard’s final summing up, and even then, the audience, a stranger whom he may have met once before “on a ship going to Africa,” is silent (199). Indeed, earlier in the text, Bernard himself laments the lack of an audience, admitting, “I need an audience. That is my downfall” (95). Between the Acts, on the other hand, is a work, as its title suggests, supremely concerned with audience and the social text it brings to a work of performed art.\footnote{177} Guiget suggested the term opera even earlier (1965), arguing that the italicized interludes, particularly when read consecutively, are “the overture to an opera, presenting all the essential motifs in compressed form and in their mutual relationship” (282).\footnote{178} As Richter notes, this more complex understanding of the leitmotif is continued in Woolf’s post-Waves fiction, particularly The Years, where the leitmotif, rather than sounding merely the emotional “tone” of a particular character or situation, revives a matrix of memory embedded in childhood but bearing on the present moment. These leitmotifs are frequently enclosed in quotation marks as if they were parts of songs (some
for instance, is her awareness of her physical, often dancing, body, but each time it appears, it is subtly altered by its context: one moment her body is described “rippling like a stalk in the wind” (32); another time, a character thinks of her “pirouetting” (79); yet another time, she is imagined “dancing like a flame, febrile, hot, over dry earth” (96). The leitmotifs in The Waves are not confined to lexical phrases that call up specific associations, as Lily’s unchanging phrase does, but, more true to the nature of Wagnerian leitmotifs, are suggestive aural images and associations that can be modified, transposed, and developed depending on how and when they are used. Susan’s most repeated leitmotif is introduced early in the novel, when she says, “I love . . . and I hate” (10). The leitmotif is not actually the phrase, “I love and I hate,” but rather, the idea of dueling emotions behind the phrase. Thus it reappears, transposed by Louis, as “To be loved by Susan would be to be impaled by a bird’s sharp beak, to be nailed to a barnyard door” (98); or in Susan’s words, as “I hate Jinny because she shows me that my hands are red, my nails bitten. I love with such ferocity that it kills me when the object of my love shows by a phrase that he can escape” (108). Like the Wagnerian model, Woolf’s sustained use of the leitmotif as a structural device serves to link the characters together. “As the novel progresses,” notes Richter, “the emotional content of the key words or leitmotifs is enhanced and deepened because multiple associations cluster around them” (54). When Bernard invokes Susan’s leitmotif at the end of the novel, for instance, he first reminds us of her leitmotif by repeating a slightly modified version of the first incarnation of her phrase, “I hate, I love” (207), before harmonizing it with his own
thoughts of *Cymbeline* to further open up the associative possibilities: “better be like Susan and love and hate the heat of the sun” (222).

**Music in *The Waves***

Though the leitmotifs work to differentiate and identify the characters, they are not direct linguistic equivalents of Wagner’s musical leitmotifs, since as Guiget and others have noted, the voices in which these leitmotifs are expressed “have the same texture, the same substance, the same tone” (283); that is, they do not *sound* different, but they do *mean* differently. For Richter, this narrative technique is a function of Woolf “[s]eeking . . . a vocabulary and a rhythm which would express thought and feeling at once personal and universal” (144). “Our attention,” as Laurence writes, “is directed toward the music and collectivity of seven voices, seven aspects of being, a construct of a higher order” (*The Reading of Silence* 202). This sense of the choric nature of the voices is revealed most strongly in Bernard’s observation of the impossibility of separating his life, voice, and very identity from the collective identity of the six friends: “when I . . . try to break off . . . what I call ‘my life,’ it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs” (230). Importantly, however, the individual voice, regardless of how inextricably linked it is to the choric narrative, is not subsumed by the chorus of which it is a part; as Frattarola notes: “for Woolf, unification does not preclude separation and individuality” (147). This distinction is made explicit both in Woolf’s sophisticated uses of leitmotifs and in her careful use of pronouns. While Bernard might end a paragraph using the inclusive plural first-person pronoun (“We are swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar that they cast no
shadow. We float, we float...”), he begins the next paragraph with a recollection that belongs only to him, as the subsequent use of the singular first-person pronouns “I,” and “me” makes clear: “I leap... and alight on some perfectly commonplace object... as I saw them sometime later, after that lady who had made me Byron had married, under the light of one whom I will call the third Miss Jones” (215).

Certainly this seamless melding of the choric and the individual voice borrows much from early opera, as the text enacts the chorus/soloist dialectic characteristic of Greek drama, which opera was originally conceived to replicate. But I would go a step further, and argue that the voice-tone remains the same from character to character because it is the “musical text” of Woolf’s operatic narrative. For the most part in The Waves, the characters, as J. W. Graham points out, “speak in the pure present (I go), a form of the present tense which we rarely use in speech or thought, in both of which the progressive form (I am going) is more natural” (194). The effect of the use of this tense to convey external actions, notes Graham, is that it “makes them seem momentary, no matter what their actual duration might be in life: they happen so rapidly that we feel them recede into the past even as they occur, and we assume an unconscious mental posture which inclines towards the future” (195). The effect, in fact, is very much like the fleeting nature of the perpetual present of music—an art form that can represent the past through quotation, but, as discussed in the introduction, has no equivalent to the past

179 In her article on The Years, Marcus specifically equates Greek drama and Wagnerian opera in terms of their respective uses of the chorus, as she argues that Woolf’s elevation of “the role of the chorus in the modern novel to its position in Greek drama... was the aesthetic equivalent of a revolutionary political act, a socialist’s demonstration of faith in the people” (“The Years as Götterdämmerung, Greek Play, and Domestic Novel” 38). While I am not comfortable with Marcus’s assumption that Woolf’s use of Wagner as literary model was an uncritical homage to the composer (at one point in the article, Marcus calls The Waves Woolf’s Parsifal), I would agree with her linking of Greek drama and Wagnerian opera through the chorus as an important component of Woolf’s writerly persona (49).
tense in language. By using a single voice tone in the pure present to narrate her text, Woolf sustains a rhythm that, like the musical text of an opera, drives, unifies, and as we shall see, contextualizes and comments on the narrative, without sacrificing the integrity of the written text as text. Though Woolf represents disunity, the novel is nevertheless formally unified by way of this musical text—the rhythm that Woolf identified as the driving force of the novel.

Through this use of the pure present tense to create a kind of layered musical text, Woolf finds a way to have “the waves to be heard all through” (June 1929; Diary 3: 236), gesturing toward the synchrony of opera, a genre in which music and language make meaning individually and collaboratively at every moment. Indeed, the fact that Woolf asks if there is a way that the waves can be “heard all through” (not “seen,” or even “thought of”), suggests that she had a musical model in mind for the novel. Though Woolf cannot “write four lines at a time, describing the same feeling, as a musician does” in order to convey the way “that things are going on at so many different levels simultaneously,” as she later wrote to Stephen Spender (10 July 1934; Letters 5: 315), she does use poetic rhythm to exploit what she earlier identified as the “incongruous associations” of language joined to music in opera. In this way, the very form of the work anticipates Bernard’s invocation at the close of the novel of the verticality of musical form as a way to counteract the limitations of the horizontal linearity of “his” narrative: “How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole—again like music. What a symphony with its concord and its discord, and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath, then grew up! Each played its own tune, fiddle, flute, trumpet, drum or whatever the instrument might be”
Interestingly, Bernard turns to the example of music not only for its ability “to give the effect of the whole,” but also for its ability to present the “concord and discord” of the multiple lives that nevertheless tell a single story.

Though the mesmerizing “rhythm” of the novel’s musical text is “heard” throughout, Woolf strenuously resists the “narcotic” effect of Wagner’s endless melody; as Woolf wrote in her diary, “the theme effort, effort, dominates: not the waves: & personality: & defiance” (22 December 1930; Diary 3: 339). Important as the notion of cyclical unity is to the work, it does not surpass the theme of human effort articulated in the interrupting narrative. As Garrett Stewart’s phonemic reading of Woolf’s prose in The Waves demonstrates, the novel’s musical text enriches the narrative not because it overcomes the prosaic nature of language, but because it complicates it: “it lets in as lingual disruption the stray reverberations ordinarily contained or suppressed by the marshaled effects of literary style” (261). The musical text is thus not an agent of transcendence: it does not, as we will see, offer a solution to Bernard’s narrative problems, Rhoda’s existential crisis, or “the incomprehensible nature of this our life” (222), but it does provide a way for Woolf formally to control the narrative without extinguishing (indeed, sometimes by contributing to) the difference, individuation, and difficulty within.

Music figures prominently in The Waves, but not as the redemptive balm that it is in Wagnerian opera (think of the frenzy of musical leitmotifs that close Götterdämmerung). When, for instance, Bernard reflects on the inexplicability of Percival’s untimely death, he cries, “there should be music, some wild carol,” (203) only to acknowledge a few lines later that “[n]o lullaby has ever occurred to me capable of
singing him to rest” (203). Indeed, every time Bernard turns to music to make sense of the fragments of lives he attempts to order, he is reminded that music is not the artistic panacea it is so often purported to be. “Here again there should be music,” remarks Bernard in his final aria, “[n]ot that wild hunting song, Percival’s music; but a painful, guttural, visceral, also soaring, lark-like, pealing song to replace these flagging, foolish transcripts—how much too deliberate! how much too reasonable!—which attempt to describe the flying moment of first love” (209). But what follows is not music, or even a written representation of music, but instead, a highly visual, descriptive passage that begins, “A purple slide is slipped over the day” (209). Or is it “music”? The sibilant effect of the repeated “s,” highlighting the consonantal slippage between “slide” and “slip,” is certainly musical as is the iambic rhythm, and rendered into poetic lines, the end rhyme of the first and third lines and the repeated dactyls (“triplets” in musical terms) become obvious:

A purple slide slips over the day.

Look at a room before she comes and after.

Look at the innocents outside pursuing their way.

They neither see nor hear; yet on they go. (209)

The rhythm of the lines cries out as music, but the sense of the lines answers Bernard’s call for music with visual (even “purple”) language, affirming Bernard’s earlier insight: “[n]o lullaby has ever occurred to me capable of singing him to rest.”

Though Woolf brings into play Wagnerian themes and techniques, her invocation is by no means a straightforward homage to, or even a biting parody of, the Wagnerian Musikdrama of which she was at one time so enamored; instead, the Wagnerian elements
in her prose represent the process by which she moves past the larger aesthetic program of “overwhelming unity” celebrated in Wagner’s operas to privilege instead the modernist notion of moments of being, as Woolf puts it in “A Sketch of the Past” (or in the more familiar Joycean lexicon, the epiphany). That which the waves represent (perhaps the transcendence of nature, or the timelessness of cyclic reality) is precisely not the theme of the novel, which, as Woolf notes, is instead human effort: hers is “an age of endeavour,” not “genius” (Common Reader 1: 297). Early in the novel, Louis feels the unifying rhythm of the world, “like a waltz tune, eddying in and out, round and round” in an eating house (75), and although he recognizes that in it “[t]he circle is unbroken; the harmony complete,” that it is “the central rhythm . . . the common mainstream,” he also realizes that he is not included in it (76). The existence of a unifying “central rhythm” is real, but it serves to contextualize his isolation, not defeat it. The “central rhythm” of the waves, heard through the novel as an operatically layered musical text, contextualizes and juxtaposes the emphatically quotidian theme of the novel without overcoming it. In Woolf’s narrative, unlike in Wagner’s operas, the arts work together not to create a sense of “overwhelming unity,” but, in keeping with Woolf’s own conception of the modern period as an “age of fragments,” to represent the way that moments of unity exist simultaneously with the many more moments of difference and difficulty (Common Reader 1: 296).

In the final pages of the novel Bernard explicitly articulates this idea, which Woolf reveals in the autobiographical essay, “A Sketch of the Past,” to be her guiding artistic philosophy. Throughout the text, Bernard fruitlessly seeks a cure for his frustrated narration in a variety of literary figures. At the end of the text, however, he seems to
reject his posturing, insisting, “I, I, I, not Byron, Shelley, Dostoevsky, but I, Bernard” (212), only to replace it with the artistic deification of a musical giant:

I went, swinging my stick, into a shop, and bought—not that I love music—a picture of Beethoven in a silver frame. Not that I love music, but because the whole of life, its masters, its adventurers, then appeared in long ranks of magnificent human beings behind me; and I was the inheritor; I, the continuer; I, the person miraculously appointed to carry it on. (212)

Bernard’s repeated injunction, “not that I love music,” makes it clear that he is asking music to accomplish something beyond itself, to reveal a truth occluded by the mass of material and detail and inconsistencies out of which he is attempting to narrativize his, and the others’ (if there is a distinction) life/lives. But after the moment of rapture passes, he recognizes the limitations of the philosophy that motivated his purchase:

But it is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly and military progress; a convenience, a lie. There is always deep below it . . . a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights . . . that rise and sink even as we hand a lady down to dinner. . . . There is nothing one can fish up in a spoon; nothing one can call an event. Yet it is alive too and deep, this stream. Immersed in it I would stop between one mouthful and the next, and look intently at a vase, perhaps with one red flower, while a reason struck me, a sudden revelation. (213-4)

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180 Neville says of Bernard: “[o]nce you were Tolstoy’s young man; now you are Byron’s young man; perhaps you will be Meredith’s young man” (70).
Bernard realizes that while the notion of the redemptive “event” (masquerading here as “Beethoven” or “music”) is seductive, it is too simple a solution (“a convenience”), and ultimately, false (“a lie”). While such constructs seem to penetrate the essence of the thing itself, they do not account for the “rushing stream” of things that also (and perhaps more importantly) constitute life: there is no “Rheingold” to be “fished up in a spoon” and set the world right.

Importantly, however, Bernard’s rejection of the redemptive event is not nihilistic. Moments of being are, for Woolf, very real; that life is made up of “many more moments of non-being” does not deny the uniqueness of these flashes of insight but instead offers the crucial contextualization for these revelatory moments (*Moments of Being* 70). Indeed, in *The Waves* Woolf honours the transience of the “sudden revelation,” just as she would later do in “A Sketch of the Past,” where, echoing Bernard, she articulates her “philosophy” that “behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern”:

that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (*Moments of Being* 72)

Clearly, for Woolf, as for Bernard, there is, in the end, no Schopenhauerian magic in music; the Wagnerian model must break down at the point at which music comes to stand for something beyond the subjectivity implied in the triple “we”: “we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.”
This recognition of music’s limitations is prefigured much earlier in the novel when Rhoda experiences the crisis of identity foreshadowed earlier in the text (50)\textsuperscript{181}; just as Woolf describes herself in “A Sketch of the Past” (78), in *The Waves*, a paralyzed Rhoda, after hearing of Percival’s death, cannot pass a puddle in her path (130). Seeking solace in music, Rhoda finds herself listening to a vocal recital at Wigmore Hall:\textsuperscript{182}

Here is a hall where one pays money and goes in, where one hears music among somnolent people who have come here after lunch on a hot afternoon. We have eaten beef and pudding enough to live for a week without tasting food. Therefore we cluster like maggots on the back of something that will carry us on. . . . Swaying and opening programmes, . . . we settle down, like walruses stranded on rocks, like heavy bodies incapable of waddling to the sear, hoping for a wave to lift us . . . . Then, swollen but contained in slippery satin, the sea-green woman comes to our rescue. She sucks in her lips, assumes an air of intensity, inflates herself and hurls herself precisely at the right moment as if she saw an apple and her voice was the arrow into the note, ‘Ah!’ (131)

Although the singer does provide Rhoda “with a cry,” the “wave” she was hoping for, Rhoda is left wondering its significance, asking, “And what is a cry?” (134), rather than feeling transformed by it. Directly following this episode, Rhoda, like Woolf in “A

\textsuperscript{181} “I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. . . . Then very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. . . . This is life then to which I am committed” (50).

\textsuperscript{182} The choice of Wigmore Hall has political overtones that may suggest the singer is singing German music. It was built as a recital hall in 1901 by the German piano firm Bechstein, whose showroom was adjacent, and originally called Bechstein Hall. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, however, general hostility toward German firms led to its sale, at a much-depreciated price, to Debenhams in 1916 (“Wigmore Hall: A Brief History”). The hall reopened as Wigmore Hall in 1917 with, ironically, a Beethoven concert that Woolf in fact attended, as she mentions in a 16 January 1917 letter to Saxon Sydney-Turner (*Letters* 2: 135).
Sketch of the Past” ponders the possibility that within art is a pattern that yokes humanity together: “‘Like’ and ‘like’ and ‘like’—but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? . . . There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling place. . . . This is our triumph; this is our consolation” (134). The chapter ends with the sense that Rhoda has found transcendence in the cry of the opera singer and the accompanying music of the “beetle-shaped men” (134). Through music, “the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing” is rendered apparent; the square upon the oblong (perhaps literally the score upon the music stand) makes a “perfect dwelling place.”

The triumph of art over life, however, is soon recognized as, at best, fleeting, and at worst, illusory. Rhoda’s initial description of the singer’s cry is figuratively delivered through the striking metaphor of “[a]n axe . . . split[ting] a tree to the core; the core is warm; sound quivers within the bark” (133). When later in Spain she reminisces about the experience, she again returns to this imagery: “[t]hen in some Hall I parted the boughs of music and saw the house we have made; the square stood upon the oblong” (170). This time, however, it is with the recognition of art’s ultimate failure to rescue: “The wave is broken; the bunch is withered,” she concludes, “I seldom think of Percival now” (171).

The transformative power of music, a concept repeatedly exploited in Wagnerian opera, is suggested by Rhoda’s experience at the recital only to be soundly rejected, especially when we learn of her eventual suicide, a fact which Bernard calmly states in his summing up. As if speaking a retrospective warning to his dead friend, he exclaims:

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183 I owe this insight to Melba Cuddy-Keane.
“Wait until these omnibuses have gone by. Do not cross so dangerously. These men are your brothers” (234). The remark is notable because it brings us back to Rhoda’s false moment of transcendence at Wigmore Hall, when she thought she had found in the singer’s cry the answer that would allow her to cross the puddle in her path. After describing the singer’s cry, she exuberantly proclaims: “I will fling myself fearlessly into trams, into omnibuses” (134). But as we learn from Bernard’s recollection of her suicide, the transcendence she felt in that moment was “a convenience,” the exuberance predicated on “a lie.” Indeed, towards the end of the novel, even as Bernard exclaims that he needs “a howl; a cry,” his idea of “wild music” is grammatically linked through a parallel phrase to “false phrases” (246).

Called up by his obvious association to the titular hero of *Parsifal*, Percival, who seems to be “symbolic of mute unity” (Moore 234) among the six characters, is the ersatz mythic hero of the work, invoked again and again as the figure that will unify the six disjointed lives into a cohesive unit—a “seven-sided flower” (104). In spite of our continual reminder in the text, however, that Percival “is a hero” (101), Percival seems to fail his mission, as, his presence notwithstanding, the six personages continue to pass through their respective worlds speaking their stories but rarely communicating with one another. As Hermione Lee and James Phelan have pointed out, with few exceptions, Rhoda, Bernard, Susan, Jinny, Louis, and Neville speak in parallel lines: typically, they talk only about themselves; occasionally, they talk about one another, but rarely do they speak to each another (Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* 168, Phelan 36). When “love of Percival” (104) compels the six characters to meet before Percival leaves for India, however, it seems to Louis as though Percival has healed the wound of their separation:
Now once more . . . as we are about to part, having paid our bill, the circle in
our blood, broken so often, so sharply, for we are so different, closes in a ring.
Something is made. Yes, as we rise and fidget a little nervously, we pray, holding
in our hands this common feeling, “Do not move, do not let the swing-door cut to
pieces the thing that we have made, that globe itself here, among these lights,
these peelings, this litter of breadcrumbs and people passing. Do not move, do
not go. Hold it for ever.” (119)

In turn, Jinny, Rhoda, Neville, Susan, and Bernard reiterate in their own terms Louis’s
sentiments, seemingly indicating that Percival’s heroic namesake is warranted. But the
episode ends with Neville’s anguished cries as the moment of unification collapses:
“Now the cab comes; now Percival goes. What can we do to keep him? How bridge the
distance between us? How fan the fire so that it blazes for ever? How signal to all time to
come that we, who stand in the street, in the lamplight, loved Percival? Now Percival is
gone” (120). The transcendent moment in The Waves is always just that—a moment,
fleeting. And when Percival is killed seemingly for naught (Neville recounts: “He fell.
His horse tripped. He was thrown”), so too dies any notion of a lasting harmonization of
the six consciousnesses into something approaching the cyclic unity of nature as
described in the poetic interludes (124). Unlike Parsifal, Percival does not restore a holy
grail or heal the wound that pains his friends, and unlike Brünnhilde’s, Percival’s death is
not transformative. His death is much more like the untimely death of Thoby Stephen, to
whom Woolf contemplated dedicating The Waves.

It would be tempting to read such moments in the text negatively, as a
stereotypically angst-ridden modernist response to the alienating reality of the modern
world. But as I noted, Woolf’s task was not to excoriate Wagner, but to move past the limiting aspects of Wagner’s all-encompassing aesthetic. It is not so much, therefore, that in *The Waves* “Woolf postulates a social unity only to undercut it,” but that she marks the exceptionality of unity by emphasizing its transience (Moore 237). Bernard, who, as I noted, opens the spoken parts of the novel with the phrase, “I see a ring,” never attains the closing sense of unity implied by his first statement. Indeed, his failure to “sum up” the novel is one of the work’s most salient characteristics. At the end of his life, in spite of his innumerable phrases, the transformative artistic metamorphosis never arrives—“No fin breaks the waste of this immeasurable sea” (237). And yet, the novel closes with an impassioned cry for life that abounds with echoes of the redemptive ending of *Parsifal*: “It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (247-8). The difference is that in Woolf’s novel, it is not the hero Percival who heals the fallen world with his spear, but the everyman (and everywoman) Bernard who leads the charge against despair. Though the interrupting (and interruptive) soliloquies that constitute the greater portion of the novel undermine the sense of mythic unity achieved in the italicized poetic passages describing the progress of a day, the novel is not nihilistic. Indeed, the contrast between the artistic triumph of the natural world poetically rendered in the waves passages, which Bernard, would-be biographer, narrator, arranger, storyteller, “self-conscious unifier” (Moore 234), strives so unsuccessfully to replicate, and the broken narrative stream of the spoken passages, enacts the novel’s central conflict between the mythic cycle of the natural world and the messy, linear, finite lives of the
humans who inhabit it. As Madeline Moore notes, “[i]t was not Woolf’s purpose in *The Waves* to overcome the phenomenological opposition between subject and object, but rather to dramatize that conflict” (220). Whereas the waves of Wagner’s continuous music serve quite literally to drown out (and eventually literally immolate) the narrative conflict in the operas, Woolf’s waves serve to highlight the *difference* and *distance* between the cyclic unity of nature and the fragmented, quotidian reality of her characters. Characters, setting, story, discourse—the elements of Woolf’s novel do not work together to create a sense of “overwhelming unity”; rather than “bruising” our eyes, ears, and brain with their cumulative effect of sameness, as Woolf accuses the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Wagner’s operas of doing, the disparate elements of *The Waves* instead highlight the fleeting *moments* of unity that rise up out of the many more moments of cacophony.
Chapter 4
La Trobe’s Failure, Woolf’s Success: Brechtian Overtones in *Between the Acts*

While divergent in tone and theme from *The Waves, Between the Acts*, Woolf’s last and most conspicuously hybrid novel, shares many of the “operatic” preoccupations that characterize *The Waves*, most notably the treatment of music as a text that demands sophisticated reading. Both novels are operatic in their insistent incorporation of dissimilar forms (poetry, prose, drama, and music) but anti-Wagnerian in their resistance to unifying these forms into an all-consuming, totalizing aesthetic. Whereas *The Waves* is a response to the aesthetic of Wagnerian opera, however, I will argue that the theatrical experiment in *Between the Acts* is Brechtian in its mimicry of and engagement with opera’s *social text*; thus it incorporates, as Woolf indicated it would in the earliest planning stages, yet one more form into its structure: criticism (see *Diary* 5: 105, 114-5).\(^1\)

\(^1\) I am using the adjective “Brechtian” with the awareness that I am simplifying Brecht’s vast and continually evolving aesthetic ideology to the collection of ideas commonly associated with Brecht’s early conceptualization of “Epic Theatre,” and especially, the notion of *Verfremdungseffekt*, commonly translated as “alienation effect” (for a succinct outline of Brecht’s evolving theoretical opus, see Brooker 209-24).

Other critics have noted the Brechtian impulse behind La Trobe’s play, but the tendency is to argue that Woolf’s novel is Brechtian because of her representation of a Brechtian theatrical experiment, not to examine how the novel in fact responds to La Trobe’s Brechtian pageant. Herbert Marder points to the awareness of the novel’s audience that they are watching characters watching a play in his passing comparison of the “unexpected affinities” between Woolf’s last novel and Brecht’s Epic Theatre (“Alienation Effects”). Karin Westman uses *Orlando* and *Between the Acts* to show how Woolf’s “method of free indirect narrative emphasizes the gap between the character’s monologue and the narrator’s report of that monologue, the gap between a character and a Brechtian actor’s demonstration of that character” (338), concluding: “it is important to see not just Miss La Trobe’s play but the novel itself as an example of fiction *qua* epic theater, staged for an audience of readers” (340). Catherine Wiley’s feminist reading of *Between the Acts* reads La Trobe’s play as Epic Theatre, but also fails to note a distinction between the work of La Trobe’s play and Woolf’s novel, as evinced in the way she introduces the novel’s production as “authored by Woolf and staged by La Trobe,” as though La Trobe were not the fictional playwright of the pageant (3). Everything in the novel is, of course, “authored by Woolf,” but within the novel, the play is both authored and produced by La Trobe. Kathy J. Phillips more generally likens Woolf to Brecht in terms of her similar use of juxtaposition as a technique to “jar . . . the reader” (xvii).
Brecht is usually thought of in terms of theatrical, not operatic, innovations. As we will see below, however, his theatrical reforms were intimately tied to the world of the opera house, specifically, the world of Wagnerian opera. By bringing up Brecht here I am obviously not speaking of an influence, since there is no evidence that Woolf even knew of the theatrical works or political writings by Bertolt Brecht that predate *Between the Acts.* I am suggesting, however, that Miss La Trobe’s play is Brechtian in its overt dismantling of what Calico terms the “audience contract” (16) and the explicit call-to-action of its didactic conclusion. As Allen McLaurin notes, like La Trobe, who “hits on the idea of reflecting fragments,” Woolf too makes use of a hybrid “mixture of poetry, narrative, and drama” (56). But there is a key difference between the fictional playwright and her creator: the latter represents drama, whereas the former presents drama. The difference may seem too obvious to state, but it is important to stress, because while La Trobe beckons her audience to critique themselves, Woolf beckons her audience to extend that critique to La Trobe’s project itself, thus avoiding the Brechtian pitfalls inherent in La Trobe’s theatrical experiment. Whereas the coercive strategies

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185 It seems unlikely that Woolf would have known Brecht’s plays. As Kim Kowalke notes, despite the success of Brecht and Weill’s *Die Dreigroschenoper* (by far the most popular of Brecht’s theatre works) on stages as far a-field as Tokyo, *Threepenny* fever did not catch on in England until 1956, though it was presented in a BBC concert performance in 1935 (“Accounting for Success” 19).

186 Pamela Caughie also notes that “[t]he structure of *Between the Acts* is very much like the structure of La Trobe’s play. Both consist of scraps of verse, bits of conversation, half-finished sentences, forgotten lines, and words dispersed by the wind” (*Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* 52).

187 The point may seem obvious, but as David McWhirter explains, the layers of audiences addressed in the text create a complex web of dialogism:

> Even if we understand that the pageant is contained within the novel's narrated discourse—and it is by no means certain that we should—our local experience of this book is frequently determined by our paradoxical position as the spectators or audience of a largely unmediated object (the pageant), which is somehow identical with the text in which we are contingently absorbed as readers. The play allows us, in effect, to turn our perspective on the novel's characters inside out. In addition to experiencing their personal and historical situation from within, we also see them from without, as actors in a drama which we view from the third balcony, a drama in which their 'part,' as we are repeatedly reminded, 'is to be the audience.' (797-8)
used by La Trobe to wake her audience from their complacency ironically replicate the authoritative aesthetic of the patriarchal theatre and history she would rewrite, the overt focus on the audience within the play’s fictional world models for the novel’s audience a new strategy of reading characterized not by passivity, emotive catharsis, or coercion, but by active, critical engagement with difference, difficulty, and dissimilarity.

Interestingly, Calico’s outline of the “magnetic field that binds the polarity of Wagner and Brecht to each other” that opens her book, Brecht at the Opera, is markedly similar to my own analysis of Woolf’s complicated relationship to Wagner (4). Though I am not using this coincidence to argue a complete confluence of style or method in the work of Woolf and Brecht—their respective politics alone would preclude such a reading—I am suggesting that La Trobe’s modernist theatrical experiment, like that of Brecht, is responding to the social and aesthetic phenomenon of “Wagnerism”; for this reason, her pageant may be considered, as Calico posits of modernist theatre, “the illegitimate child of opera” (3). Thus the comparison to Brecht that I am drawing is more than a linking of Woolf’s modernism to modernist drama; it is a linking of the two through a shared concern with the problems and possibilities of opera, a concern in which the specter of Wagner looms large. 188

Too often these distinct audiences are uncritically conflated, as are the aims of the fictional playwright (La Trobe) and her creator (Woolf).

188 Wagner is not the only specter looming between the acts of this novel: Between the Acts began as respite from the writing of the biography Roger Fry, which Woolf began in 1938, though she had had the letters in her possession for three years prior to beginning the project. In her diaries, Woolf repeatedly notes the difficulty of writing the “solid world of Roger” in comparison to the ease and delight of writing the “airy world of Poyntz Hall,” which was the working title of Between the Acts (20 May 1938; Diaries 5 141):
cant settle either to my play (Pointz Hall is to become in the end a play) or to Roger’s Cambridge letters. (9 May 1938; Diaries 5 139)
I’m taking a frisk at P.H. at wh. I can only write for one hour. Like the Waves, I enjoy it immensely: head screwed up over Roger. (6 October 1938; Diaries 5 179)
The suggestive possibility that Miss La Trobe is based on Ethel Smyth, argued by both Clements (“Virginia Woolf, Ethel Smyth, and Music” 56) and Elizabeth Wood (137-8), further links Between the Acts to opera. As Wood notes, Smyth’s “greatest achievement was to compose six operas when only a handful of women had composed even one before” (126). While Woolf never felt sufficiently musically educated to ascertain the artistic merit of Smyth’s compositions, she was extraordinarily impressed both by her autobiographical writings and her indomitable spirit. At the same time, Smyth’s dominating personality was not Woolf’s, and Woolf was not always in sympathy

I rush to [Pointz Hall] for relief after a long pressure of Fry facts. . . . [Pointz Hall is] [t]o be written for pleasure. (19 December 1938; Diaries 5 193)

McLaurin notes that “Fry’s influence pervades Between the Acts” (54), a statement backed up by the following diary entry, in which Woolf shows herself using Fry’s theories to question, refine, and further develop her own writing style as she works on Between the Acts:

I was . . . in full flood this morning with P.H. [Pointz Hall]. I think I have got at a more direct method of summarising relations; & and then the poems (in metre) run off the prose lyric vein, which, as I agree with Roger, I overdo. That was by the way the best criticism I’ve had for a long time: that I poetise my inanimate scenes, stress my personality; dont let the meaning emerge from the matière—Certainly I owed Roger £150. (18 January 1939; Diaries 5 200)

The particular privileging of “orts, scraps and fragments” in Between the Acts (111), along with the complicated role Woolf assigns to music and the focus on the present moment, however, can be seen more directly as a response to the abstract “universality” of Fry’s notion of “pure form.” One of the most succinct summaries of Fry’s notion of “pure form” is contained in a passage from a letter from Fry to G. L. Dickinson (1913), which Woolf quotes from at length in Roger Fry:

I’m continuing my aesthetic theories and I have been attacking poetry to understand painting. I want to find out what the function of content is, and am developing a theory . . . that it is merely directive of form and that all the essential aesthetic quality has to do with pure form. . . . I think that in proportion as poetry becomes more intense the content is entirely remade by the form and has no separate value at all. You see the sense of poetry is analogous to the things represented in painting. I admit that there is also a queer hybrid art of sense and illustration, but it can only arouse particular and definitely conditioned emotions, whereas the emotions of music and pure painting and poetry when it approaches purity are really free abstract and universal. (qtd. in Roger Fry 183)

Though Fry acknowledges a place for the depictive in art, he clearly idealizes form over content, going so far so as to suggest that in the best poetry, content, absorbed by form, “has no separate value at all.” But Woolf’s method in Between the Acts is designed precisely to “arouse particular and definitely conditioned emotions,” insofar as she situates her characters in a very specific historical moment—a midsummer June day in 1939—and valorizes the impurity of the poly/caco-phonic voices of the community over the “really free abstract and universal” voice of the artist. Moreover, in Between the Acts music is not represented as transcendent in the Paterian tradition that Fry invokes above, but is instead represented as the cultural link by which an audience is brought together in order that the present moment might be examined.
with either Smyth’s forcefulness or the militant nature of her suffragist activities. We see this conflicted portrait emerge in Woolf’s letters. On the one hand, Woolf writes admiringly to Smyth of the first time she saw the composer in a reminiscence that is echoed in her characterization of La Trobe in Between the Acts: “I suppose I told you how I saw you years before I knew you?—coming bustling down the gangway at the Wigmore Hall, in tweeds and spats, a little cocks feather in your felt, and a general look of angry energy” (12 October 1940; Letters 6: 439). But Woolf could also be unsympathetic to Smyth’s “angry energy,” as her comments in an earlier letter to Vita Sackville-West indicate: “Oh Ethel! I could not face her, though she was passing our door. Her letters sound as if she was in a furious droning mood, like a gale, all on one note” (27 August 1936; Letters 6: 68).

Viewing Smyth as a model for La Trobe helps to put Woolf’s critique of her playwright’s project in perspective. Cuddy-Keane’s observation that “the greatest charge that can be brought against [La Trobe] is not that she embodies the evils of leadership, but rather that, as a leader, she fails to unify her followers,” gets to the empathic tone of Woolf’s critique, but I would locate the reason for it elsewhere (“The Politics of Comic Modes” 278). As her argument in A Room of One’s Own and especially Three Guineas makes clear, Woolf sought practical solutions to women’s inequality that would change the very structure of the patriarchal apparatuses that organize society; Smyth, on the other hand, “celebrates that power even while, perhaps unconsciously, she demeans it” (Wood 189).

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189 Smyth spent two months in London’s Holloway prison where Sir Thomas Beecham remembers finding “her conducting, with a toothbrush through her cell bars, the prisoners who marched and sang to [Smyth’s own “The March of the Women”] in the exercise yard below” (Wood 130).
While La Trobe’s project is anti-patriarchal and anti-imperialist in theme, its mode of representation replicates the authoritative and coercive strategies of the master narratives she would rewrite, just as Brecht’s overt didacticism defeated the very notion of critical engagement it was Epic Theatre’s task to provoke, and Smyth’s musical projects, while an integral part of her feminist identity, imitated, as far as Woolf understood, the style of the German masters. “In her heyday she must have been formidable—ruthless, tenacious, exacting, lightning quick, confident; with something of the directness & [single-?] ness of genius,” Woolf surmises of Smyth, before qualifying her praise with a dismissal of Smyth’s artistic achievement as imitative: “though they say she writes music like an old dryasdust German music master” (16 June 1930; Diary 3: 306).

The Operatic Roots of *Between the Acts*

In “Impressions at Bayreuth,” written long before Woolf had conceived of *Between the Acts*, but in the same year that Woolf first heard Smyth’s opera *The Wreckers* (Clements 59), Woolf describes the drama that plays out in between the acts of an opera:

When the music is silent the mind insensibly slackens and expands, among happy surroundings: heat and the yellow light, and the intermittent but not unmusical noises of insects and leaves smooth out the folds. In the next interval, between seven and eight, there is another act out here also; it is now dusky and perceptibly fresher; the light is thinner, and the roads are no longer crossed by regular bars of

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190 The call to break the rhythm of patriarchy by refusing to participate in its political apparatuses—even in the fight for agency—is the guiding argument of *Three Guineas*, where Woolf calls for the complete restructuring of patriarchal and imperialist society.
shade. The figures in light dresses moving between the trees of the avenue, with depths of blue air behind them, have a curiously decorative effect. (*Essays* 1: 290)

The passage is not only prescient in its anticipation of John Cage’s experiments with music and silence, but also explicit in its reminder that opera is a performed art. As such, the operatic text is not limited to the action on stage but includes also the ever-changing social text contributed by the opera-going public in attendance (“there is another act out here also”), particularly when this public is one that has made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth. Closer to the writing of her last novel, Woolf again turns to the action outside the stage, to the music not played by the orchestra, in a description, this time penned in her diary, of another evening at the opera. “Last night we went to the gala opera,” the entry begins. But instead of describing the opera (indeed, the entry itself gives no clue as to what was seen or heard at the gala), Woolf proceeds to offer a lively description of the *audience*: how the fortune of Lady Abingdon, who arrives late, “has been spent on her face,” how “old bibulous Maurice Baring red as a turkey cock” endeavored to clear Edmund Gosse’s character, how Mrs. Grenfell’s chin, as Woolf’s companion Christabel McLaren quipped, “should have an inch or two hammered off.” More interesting, at least for my purposes, than even the brilliancy of her acerbic prose is her use of the phrase that would eventually be chosen as the title of her last novel, as she writes about the audience as if it were a performance in its own right, carefully discerning

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191 As Cuddy-Keane notes, “[t]he essay on Bayreuth foreshadows Woolf’s interest in intermissions and the way they are filled by the audience’s choric commentary on the opera” (“Politics of Comic Modes” 282).
192 Woolf’s “uncanny prevision” of John Cage’s experiments in *Between the Acts* has been noted by several critics (see especially Cuddy-Keane, “Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies” 91, 95 n7).
Lady A’s reaction to the “draggled procession” of women and children as if Lady A were an actress whose every expression required reading, and even characterizing Tom Bridges in theatrical terms:

*Between the acts* we all stood in the street, a dry brilliant night, with women all opening their cloaks: then came dribbling through us a draggled procession of poor women wheeling perambulators & carrying small, white haired dazed children; going across Waterloo bridge. I watched Lady A’s expression to see if she had children; but could only gather a momentary schoolboyish compunction. There was Tom Bridges; a gallant, irresistible General, with one leg, his head on one side; off the stage as it seemed, so typical of the distinguished elderly Beau. (my italics, 24 June 1931; *Diary 4: 31*)

In both the early article on Bayreuth and the later diary entry, the basic premise of *Between the Acts*, a work in which the drama off-stage is accorded at least as much importance as the drama on stage, is foreshadowed by the experience of opera.

Indeed, Woolf’s use of the phrase that would eventually become the title of *Between the Acts* in the passage above, together with the La Trobe/Smyth connection and the earlier article on Bayreuth, suggests the tantalizing possibility that by the time Woolf titled her final novel she was thinking of it as analogous in some respect to opera.

Certainly Giles’s answer to Mrs. Manresa’s question, “Are they going to act?” before the pageant within the novel begins could very easily describe opera: “[a]ct; dance; sing; a little bit of everything” (37), as might Woolf’s similar description of the novel that

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193 From this description Bridges emerges as a precursor both to the novel’s affable Mr. Oliver, a retired member of the Indian Civil Service (5), and to the Colonel Mayhew, who cannot fathom why La Trobe chooses to leave out the British Army (94).
contains the entertainment as a “medley” (19 December 1938; Diaries 5: 193). But it is the slippage in meaning as well as syllable in the phrase, “a mellay; a medley” (57), as William feels the entertainment to be, that is perhaps most indicative of the operatic roots of the novel. As Cuddy-Keane reminds us in her annotation of this phrase, while “mellay” has negative connotations of “confusion, chaos, and conflict,” “medley” is more typically read positively as “multiplicity, heterogeneity, and interrelation.” For Cuddy-Keane, this shift “identifies a crux of the pageant, of the novel, of life. Do the mixed styles and diversity of sources and voices create a muddle or a new hybrid form?” (“Notes” 107). I would suggest a reading of this slippage not in terms of a dilemma, but in terms of Woolf’s recognition of the vital part that the social text “plays” in the way in which performed texts generate meaning. The social and musical texts of “Opera—capital O,” to borrow Kramer’s phrase to differentiate opera as generic institution from opera as individual work (Opera and Modern Culture 4), makes a “mellay” out of even the most carefully constructed “medley” (or opera—lower-case o). Like the visual symmetry of Woolf’s phrase, “a mellay; a medley,” Between the Acts sets up as equal the role of the audience and the role of the author, disrupting authorial control and dismantling the fourth wall in a manner not even the novel’s Brechtian playwright could predict.

**La Trobe’s Epic Theatre**

Brecht’s Marxist politics rendered traditional drama, by which I mean drama that is primarily aesthetic rather than dialectic, impossible, obsolete, and irresponsible, as he explains in a 1927 letter for the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* titled “Shouldn’t We Abolish Aesthetics?” (20-22). “The essential point of the epic theatre,” writes the playwright in
“The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties” (1927), one of the first essays outlining his new school of play-writing, “is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason” (23). But it is in “The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre” (1930) that the inherent didacticism of Epic Theatre is most apparent. In this essay, published as notes to his opera Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny, Brecht focuses specifically on opera’s social function, “that of providing an evening’s entertainment” (34), as he posits a new theatre that “arouses [the spectator’s] capacity for action” and “forces [the spectator] to take decisions” (37). Brecht’s main target in this operatic “innovation” is Wagner. In language that reads markedly similar to Woolf’s own criticism of Wagner “bruising” her senses, Brecht decries “the process of fusion” in the Gesamtkunstwerk that reduces the spectator to “a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art” (38). To the notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk “muddle,” Brecht proposes a “separation of the elements,” the main purpose of which is to assure that reason prevails over emotion (italics in original, 37): “Whatever is intended to produce hypnosis, is likely to induce sordid intoxication, or creates fog, has got to be given up” (38).

Brecht’s innovations aimed to introduce into the theatre the practices of critical reading;\(^\text{194}\) practically speaking, this meant that the spectator should be aware at all times that he or she was watching a play. As such, in Epic Theatre, amateur actors and singers are preferred; illustrative, continuous music is rejected in favor of music that can “adopt attitudes” (Brecht 39); all songs are sung as “phenomenal song”;\(^\text{195}\) scenes are written

\(^{194}\) As Brecht notes in “The Literalization of the Theatre” (notes to the Threepenny Opera), “[f]ootnotes, and the habit of turning back in order to check a point, need to be introduced into playwriting” (44).

\(^{195}\) “When an actor sings he undergoes a change of function. Nothing is more revolting than when the actor pretends not to notice that he has left the level of plain speech and started to sing” (Brecht 44).
such that they are independent, rather than constituent, of each other; “gests,” or stylized gestures, are employed to “reveal the socially constructed nature of human interaction” (Calico 45); scene titles on screens and placards “literarize” the plot, etc. (see Brecht 33-46). An uncanny number of these Brechtian constructs are replicated in the pageant in Between the Acts.\footnote{Wiley details some of the Brechtian features of the pageant, such as the amateurish non-realistic look of the set, and the way in which the villagers “splice their characters onto their own identities” (10). In a provocative footnote in her excellent article explicating the influence of Jane Harrison’s work on Greek drama in Between the Acts, Sandra D. Shattuck briefly enumerates some of the Brechtian elements I discuss here (297 n9).} La Trobe too makes use of amateur actors who, as Woolf makes clear, never lose their own identities in the identities of the characters they play. As a consequence of the amateurism of the players, the audience is always aware that they are watching a play. Eliza Clark remains throughout a “splendidly made up” shopkeeper pretending to be Queen Elizabeth; she does not become, in the audience’s eyes, Queen Elizabeth (52).\footnote{The only actor who is truly convincing in his role is Albert, “the village idiot” (53), but even he does not allow the audience to rest untroubled in the play they are watching; the audience nervously waits out his part in fear that he, not the character he plays, will do “something dreadful” (54).} Indeed, in several instances the narrator makes a point of calling the actors by their actual names, not by the names of the characters they play. Phyllis Jones may declare herself to be England, but from the narrator’s perspective, she remains a villager: “England am I, Phyllis Jones continued, facing the audience” (49). When Mrs. Swithin comes in late, she asks, “And who’s this?” presumably asking whom the actor is meant to portray, but again, the narrator’s answer points to the identity of the actor herself: “It was Hilda, the carpenter’s daughter” (50). The narrator is in fact reflecting the dual consciousness maintained by the audience throughout the pageant, as the audience delights in seeing the villagers transformed, rather than empathizing with the characters they play.
Other characteristics are similarly Brechtian. La Trobe’s play is not an opera, yet as I will discuss in detail below, music plays an integral role. Popular tunes are blared out through a machine whose insistent and interruptive “chuff, chuff, chuff” continually reminds the audience of the mode of the music’s production and prevents the music from becoming a naturalized part of the afternoon’s entertainment (47).\(^\text{198}\) The play itself consists of independent scenes borrowed from plays from times past in a move reminiscent of Brecht’s pervasive “borrowing” (acknowledged in his “adaptation” of John Gay’s *The Beggars Opera*, unacknowledged in most other instances). The villager’s speeches are even punctuated with stylized gestures that might be equated to Brecht’s notion of *gestus*. If Albright is correct that the “highest goal of *gestus* is to eliminate all ambiguity of interpretation” (*Untwisting* 112), then surely the mock-formal acting style of Eliza Clark, dressed in a cape made of “swabs used to scour saucepans” (52), impersonating Queen Elizabeth qualifies:

*Down on the jetty, there in the west land, –*

*(she pointed her first at the blazing blue sky)*

*Mistress of pinnacles, spires and palaces –*

*(her arm swept towards the house)*

*.........................

*The ashen haired babe*

*(she stretched her swarthy, muscular arm)*

*Stretched his arm in contentment (52-3)*

\(^{198}\) In his earliest plays, before he had begun his longstanding practice collaborating with composers, Brecht also made use of popular tunes, which he would strip of their original lyrics and replace with his own (Kowalke, “Brecht and Music” 243).
Though she does not make use of Brechtian placards, La Trobe “literarizes” the plot by way of a detailed programme to which the audience continually refers, and which makes explicit the course of the afternoon’s entertainment and reinforces the notion that the play is a performed text; the programme at one point even begs the audience “to imagine” an entire scene that has been omitted “[o]wing to lack of time” (85). The mirror trick at the end of the pageant, which seeks to “make strange” the audience members’ very reflections, to cast a defamiliarizing self-reflective (and self-reflecting) gaze on “ourselves,” is a model example of Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*. And the disembodied anonymous voice that addresses the audience through a loudspeaker at the close of the play is Brechtian in the extreme, both in its didacticism and in its thorough dismantling of any illusions that the audience might have harbored regarding the play as escapist entertainment.

‘*Dispersed are we*’: Music and Words in *Between the Acts*

At the end of the day, the fourth wall *is* broken, but rather than La Trobe’s vision programming the audience, Woolf uses the effect of the music on the play’s audience to show how the audience, entering the play through the dismantled fourth wall, plays an unscripted (and unwelcome, from La Trobe’s perspective) part in La Trobe’s play. La Trobe may implore her audience to “*break the rhythm and forget the rhyme*” (italics in original, 111) but in actuality, she, with “her look of a commander pacing his deck” (39), “desperately wants to tell them what to think” (Wiley 13). Thus there is an ironic discrepancy not lost on Woolf between La Trobe’s plea and the authoritarian means by which she delivers it (111). The irony that Woolf uncovers in La Trobe’s project is also a chief irony of Brecht’s dialectical theatre. Whereas the “renegogiated audience contract”
in the operas and Lehrstück may have been, in theory, “an attempt to liberate the
listening spectator from musical manipulation so that she could formulate an independent
response to the performance” (Calico 7), in practice, Brecht’s use of music was as
“authoritarian” as Wagner’s was, in that he could not fathom an independent critical
response that was not in concert with his own political agenda. This is why he viewed
the success of Die Dreigroschenoper as “mistaken” (see Kowalke, “Brecht and Music”
253). For Brecht, an audience uncritically enjoying the music of his operas is equivalent
to Mrs. Manresa, forced to “fac[e] herself in the glass” in the last act of La Trobe’s play,
“us[ing] it as a glass; had out her mirror, powdered her nose; and moved one curl,
disturbed by the breeze, into its place” (110). But as Kowalke explains, though music
frequently interfered with the aims of the political agenda driving Brecht’s theatrical
works, it was also indispensable because it “provided him with a powerful mechanism to
reclaim and refunctio in ‘epic drama’ the presentational mode of address” (“Brecht and
Music” 242). During rehearsals for Ernst-Josef Aufricht’s production of his opera
Mahagonny, Brecht “publicly denounced his musical collaborator Kurt Weill as a
‘phony Richard Strauss’” and “bemoaned that ‘all is washed out by the music’”; still,
“only one of his nearly fifty completed dramatic works lacks music” (Kowalke, “Brecht
and Music” 251, 242).

199 In “Wagner’s Relevance for Today” Theodor Adorno also points to the ironic confluence of Brecht and
Wagner: “one might speak, in regard to the entire Ring and other works of the mature Wagner, of epic
theater—although the rabid anti-Wagnerian Brecht would not have wanted to hear this and would be at my
throat” (596).
200 Kowalke’s article, “Brecht and Music: Theory and Practice,” is a useful overview of the complex
relationship that music plays in Brecht’s theory, a relationship explored in depth in Calico’s monograph on
Brecht and opera. On the “misunderstood success” of Die Dreigroschenoper, as Adorno put it, see
Kowalke’s “Accounting for Success: Misunderstanding Die Dreigroschenoper.”
As Michelle Pridmore-Brown and Bonnie Kime Scott have shown, La Trobe uses the gramophone to manipulate her audience in a manner that calls to mind, somewhat ironically, the fascist dictators and their controlling use of technology that haunts the novel. But that the music comes from a gramophone, and not live musicians, is important also insofar as it renders the mode of the music’s production audible throughout, whether by the “chuff, chuff, chuff” of the machine or the “tick, tick, tick” of the needle, both of which “[seem] to hold [the audience] together, tranced” (51).\textsuperscript{201} (The sonic visibility of the hidden gramophone in \textit{Between the Acts} is itself a kind of Brechtian re-working of the Wagnerian pit, which, as Adorno argued, served, like Wagner’s lush orchestration, to hide the means of the music’s production [\textit{In Search of Wagner} 82, 108].) Though Brecht himself preferred live musicians and original music, La Trobe’s use of popular tunes on the gramophone is Brechtian in its effect: no matter how lulled they are by the music, at no point are the audience members allowed to divorce the sound and any emotion it engenders from the materiality of its production. But it is also Brechtian in the way it functions as a coercive and subversive text (“adopts attitudes”), rather than as a supportive or illustrative text. La Trobe uses music to herd the audience members together (at one point the narrator directly compares the audience to the browsing cattle)\textsuperscript{202} and to break through the protective social veneer preventing them from recognizing their connectedness to the people, past and present, with whom they share their existence. This would seem to be antithetical to Brecht’s insistence that music ought

\textsuperscript{201} Later on La Trobe worries the tactic is losing its effectiveness: “Chuff, chuff, chuff went the machine. Time was passing. How long would time hold them together?” (91).

\textsuperscript{202} “Suddenly the cows stopped, lowered their heads, and began browsing. Simultaneously the audience lowered their heads and read their programmes” (85).
to be ironic and detached, and at odds with his antipathy for empathy in the theatre, except that La Trobe’s purpose ultimately is to use music to trap her audience members into letting down their guards so that, when the stage is inverted upon them, they are in a position to view themselves critically, as they really are.

Though the gramophone’s “chuff, chuff, chuff” unnerves the audience, once music finally is sounded, the audience relaxes and settles in, “afloat on the stream of the melody,” to receive passively the entertainment: “Muscles loosened; ice cracked. . . . The play had begun” (49). Throughout the play, La Trobe’s use of music taps into the very narcotic effect of Wagnerian music decried by Brecht. She means to induce emotion, which is why the imposition of an interval is so maddening to her: “Just as she had brewed emotion, she spilt it” (58). At one point, “[t]he tune on the gramophone reel[s] from side to side as if drunk with merriment” (53). At another point, the narrator’s description of the dancing villagers recalls Nietzsche’s Dionysian Maenads: “It didn’t matter what the words were; or who sang what. Round and round they whirled, intoxicated by the music” (58). Though the choric voice of the audience murmurs, “Music wakes us. Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken. Look and listen. See the flowers, how they ray their redness, whiteness, silverness and blue” (73), as they regroup for the next act, the somnolent rhythm of the phrase seems to belie its content, as does the narrator’s observation that directly precedes it.203 As the narrator describes the crowd summoned by the “brave music, wafted from the bushes” finding their seats, it is

203 For Laurence, this choric atmosphere “contains a pattern of simultaneity or chords in which minds meet and unspoken voices of the past and present fuse. . . . The unspoken thoughts of Isa, Giles, and Mrs. Manresa—along with the sounds of war, history, and literature as represented by Miss La Trobe’s pageant and the lines of poetry running through Isa’s mind—create new chords of meaning and a blending of voices and sounds that is more complex than, for example, The Voyage Out, where Woolf holds to a single voice and mind” (The Reading of Silence 179).
observed that nature-lover Cobbet of Cobbs Corner stoops to examine a flower, but is, ironically, “pressed on by people pushing from behind” (73)—the same crowd claiming, “Music wakes us.” The crowd joins in the rhythm of the music it hears without hearing it at all, just as they speak of “seeing” flowers as they trample them underfoot.

Given this music-induced trance, it is unsurprising that Isa repeatedly expresses to William Dodge her annoyance that the “play keeps running in [her] head” (64, 69). And indeed, the play’s rhythm does seem to exert an uncontrollable power over its audience, who become its actors not only during the last act, when they are subjected to their own reflection, but much earlier, when they unwittingly continue the action on stage when the play breaks for an interval. As the gramophone moans, “Dispersed are we,” members of the audience, beginning with Mrs. Manresa, take up “the strain” of the rhyming language of the Elizabethan spoof they just watched:

*Dispersed are we.* “Freely, boldly, fearing no one” (she pushed a deck chair out of her way). “Youth and maidens” (she glanced behind her; but Giles had his back turned). “Follow, follow, follow me . . . Oh Mr. Parker, what a pleasure to see you here! I’m here for tea!” (59)

In turn, Isabella, Dodge, Giles, Cobbet of Cobbs Corner, and Lucy each express their own particular sentiments in the rhyming language of the play, as if puppets of the ventriloquist-playmaker, until finally Bart ends their music-induced trance: “‘But for us, my old Cindy’—he picked up his hat—‘the game’s over.’ The glare and the stare and the beat of the tom-tom, he meant” (60).

As Pridmore-Brown’s reading of *Between the Acts* as a fighting response to fascism shows, the “rhythm and rhyme” of the gramophone’s tunes seem to “transform
individuals into a herd that can be controlled by a charismatic leader” (408).

Certainly the sound of “Bossy” (40), as the villagers privately call their director, vociferating from the trees (84), then through the megaphone (111), brings to mind an authoritarian leader (see my n145), as does the narrator’s description of “[h]er abrupt manner and stocky figure; her thick ankles and sturdy shoes; her rapid decisions barked out in guttural accents” (40). If the pageant actors are her “little troops” (40), surely the “caught and caged” audience members are her “prisoners” (105), and the gramophone music the means by which she keeps these “prisoners” captive, as her anxious concern as she waits out another interval indicates: “‘The tune!’ Miss La Trobe commanded. ‘Hurry up! The tune! The next tune! Number Ten!’” (92). In the end, however, the audience’s response is not at all within La Trobe’s authorial or musical control, and eventually even the music’s narcotic effect begins to wane: “the tune trilled and tinkled, ineffectively shepherding the audience. Some ignored it. Some still wandered. Others stopped, but stood upright. Some, like Colonel and Mrs. Mayhew, who had never left their seats, brooded over the blurred carbon sheet which had been issued for their information” (94).

Indeed, Woolf’s representation of the audience suggests that while some members may have been under music’s spell for a time (La Trobe at one point puts it at “twenty-five minutes”), and at least one, Mrs. Swithin, does feel the transformation La Trobe would effect, on the whole, the “chorus,” like Manresa checking herself in the mirror, escapes the program La Trobe attempts to impose on them (60, 110). La Trobe

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204 Mrs. Swithin anticipates La Trobe’s dictum, “O we’re all the same” (111) when, attempting to congratulate La Trobe, she enthuses: “What a small part I’ve had to play! But you’ve made me feel I could have played . . . Cleopatra!” (92). Other members of the audience, however, are not so enfranchised by the experience. It takes Mrs. Manresa’s overt sexuality, not the play, to make the frustrated Giles feel “less of an audience, more of an actor” (66).
recognizes that she does not make Giles or Cobbet of Cobbs Corner “see,” but as we have seen, the “vision” imparted on the seemingly obedient chorus too was only a side-effect of the “glare and the stare and the beat of the tom-tom” (60): it did not provoke action or authentic emotional engagement with the world. The audience members remain wrapped up in their own world. As she watches the pageant, Isa, for instance, muses to herself, “[d]id the plot matter,” because she can conceive of only two emotions: love and hate, though a third, “peace,” comes to her later (56, 57). Indeed, Isa’s comment that the “plot’s nothing” (56) seems to sum up the general experience of the audience, who is watching a play in which, as the narrator notes repeatedly, “[t]he wind bl[ows] the words away” (76, 75). The narrator’s representation of Giles’s interior monologue as he listens to the Elizabethan scene demonstrates explicitly how La Trobe’s coercive music actually subverts her own project. To the merry Elizabethan song Eliza “Queen Elizabeth” Clark sings, Giles mutters alternate lyrics, first repeating a line from King Lear and then invoking William Cowper until, “[e]xiled from its festival, the music turned ironical” (53). By silencing La Trobe’s plot in favor of the social text of its audience, which is literally incorporated into the novel’s text, Woolf inserts into her representation of La Trobe’s pageant a critique of the playmaker’s methods.205

205 This is not the place to analyze Woolf’s complex use of free indirect discourse, though it is fascinating to note how the choric voice blends with the individual voice to create a “narrator” that seems to function as an amalgam of the audience, thus incorporating into the very narrative style the notion of a social text. Between the Acts was published posthumously, against Woolf’s final instructions not to publish it. As such, we cannot be sure that the text appears in the form Woolf would have intended: she did not, for instance, distinguish between play and novel text by way of italics, as is done, on Leonard’s recommendation, in all published versions of the text. Though I do not wish to enter into an argument about authorial intention and editing practices, it is fascinating to imagine how our response to the novel would change if the play passages were not italicized (see Dick and Millar xlviii-xlxi). We might take Woolf’s own classification of the novel as her “play” more seriously: “Finished Pointz Hall, the Pageant: the Play – finally Between the Acts this morning” (Diary 5: 356; see also Diary 5: 139). The text would perhaps read more like one of Stein’s plays, where stage directions and other dramatic paratext are not differentiated
Though I would agree that Woolf positively figures the way in which music brings the characters “together momentarily into a chorus through their shared act of listening, while at the same time, engendering a space in which to make a multiplicity of separate associations and interpretations” (Frattarola 148), it is clear that La Trobe bemoans her audience’s unpredictability. And no wonder: the social text of the theatrical event, the text both Woolf and La Trobe focus on, is, as Woolf wrote in Orlando, perhaps the most frightening text of all: the moment of now.  

Old Oliver mutters that the machine is “[m]arking time” (51), to which Lucy, who does not “believe in history” (104) counters, “Which doesn’t exist for us . . . We’ve only the present” (51), a statement which articulates the main difference between the action on stage, which, while always playing out in present time, can actually represent the past, and the action off stage, among the audience, where “[t]he hands of the clock . . . [stop] at the present moment” (110). The characters in the novel, whether by La Trobe’s attempt to “try ten mins. present time” (107) or the “tick and ring” of the “[a]ctual clocks and bells” that Woolf inserts into the narrative, are “invariably . . . return[ed] . . . to the narrative present” (Pridmore-Brown 409). When Mrs. Manresa asks if there is anything she and the other upper-class guests might do to assist with the pageant, Bartholomew, with remarkable, if fortuitous, foresightedness, replies: “Our part . . . is to be the audience. And a very important part too” (37). As the afternoon wears on, the Olivers and their guests will come to learn just how important their “part” is, as La Trobe uses and disrupts the

from spoken text, but with one significant addition: the audience’s response to the play would be incorporated into the play-text also.

206 “No one need wonder that Orlando started, pressed her hand to her heart, and turned pale. For what more terrifying revelation can there be than that it is the present moment?” (Woolf, Orlando 285).
conventions of the theatre and its social text to redirect the attention from the stage and toward its captive audience—but so too will La Trobe, as Woolf flips the audience/author dichotomy, making the audience the authors and La Trobe the reluctant audience, a reversal encapsulated in Mr. Oliver’s knowing advice to his sister: “Thank the actors, not the author . . . Or ourselves, the audience” (120). La Trobe remarks that she is “a slave to her audience” (58) when she agrees, against her artistic vision, to an interval. But she is also a “slave to her audience” because the moment of now, which she chooses to spotlight, is, like the music she plays, always contingent, always evolving, always opening up, rather than delineating, meaning, as her frustrated outburst reveals:

“Audiences were the devil. O to write a play without an audience—the play” (107).

As I discussed in the introduction, music typically suffers in critical discussions because of its perceived lack in terms of making “meaning.” On the one hand, it is often described as expressing that which is transcendent and/or universal; on the other hand, it is seen as incapable of expressing anything; and in a typical combination of the two dichotomous positions, is often described as representing everything because it represents nothing. As we have seen in the pageant in *Between the Acts*, however, music plays a more complicated role than any of these conceptions would allow; at times, it appears to enslave its audience, at other times, it seems to liberate them. But at no point does it either transcend meaning or cease to make meaning. Regardless of which role it is playing, it requires sophisticated reading since, as Woolf shows both in her representation

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As Cuddy-Keane has pointed out, the audience might literally be meant to be read as players in the drama: “[i]n Greek drama, the songs or chants of the chorus interrupt the action; in fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s entry for chorus—which Woolf might well have read—describes the Greek chorus as appearing ‘between the “acts”’” (“Politics of Comic Modes” 275).
of music and her own use of “music,” its powers of suggestion are endless, and for
this reason, the unpredictability of music (like the unpredictability of audiences) will
always cause problems for didactic theatre.

La Trobe’s music is not the only musical text that requires reading in the novel.
Woolf’s resounding use of rhythm, which musicalizes even the mechanical sound that the
gramophone makes, models the way in which the novel’s readers need to “listen” to the
music heard by La Trobe’s audience. The “chuff, chuff, chuff” and “tick, tick, tick” of
the gramophone sound the triple rhythm motif that runs throughout the text of the novel
and functions, thematically, as a rhythmic counterpart to Woolf’s tendency to triangulate
dichotomies (Isa’s love and hate, for instance, becoming love, hate, and peace). Such
“music” in Woolf’s prose is as productive a part of the text as are the words. It can be
illustrative, as the syncopated beat in her celebrated description of jazz music is: “The
tune changed; snapped, broke, jagged. Fox-trot was it? Jazz? Anyhow the rhythm
kicked, reared snapped short” (109). It can be ironic, as we saw in the hypnotic
rhythm of the chorus that claims: “Music wakes us.” It can be revelatory, as when it
reveals, through rhyme, the word that Giles dare not speak. As Gillian Beer shows, the

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208 See, for instance:

Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time
was . . . (24)
Follow, follow, follow me . . . Oh Mr. Parker, what a pleasure to see you here! I’m for tea! (59)
Shall I . . . go or stay? Slip out some other way? Or follow, follow, follow the dispersing
company? (59)
For this day and this dance and this merry, merry May
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Will be over, over, over. (72)
Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears, Tears. Tears. (107)
“Yes,” Isa answered. “No,” she added. It was Yes, No. Yes, yes, yes, the tide rushed embracing.
No, no, no, it contracted. (127)

As Cuddy-Keane notes, the “triple melody” of the view, the tune, and the cows of which the narrator
speaks at one point is heard in various places elsewhere in the text (“Introduction” xlix).

209 See for instance Cuddy-Keane’s annotation of this passage (206).
word “queer,” which Giles will not say, is covertly revealed, a few pages later, in the outer rhyme of “clear” in Isa’s rhythmic musing: “Isabella guessed the word that Giles had not spoken. . . . But somewhere, this cloud, this crust, this doubt, this dust—She waited for a rhyme, it failed her; but somewhere surely one sun would shine and all, without at doubt would be clear” (qtd. in Beer xvii). Through this sophisticated use and representation of music, Woolf models for and requires of her readers new, operatic strategies of reading, what Clements calls “apperceptive listening” (“Virginia Woolf, Ethel Smyth” 52), as the reader is charged with the responsibility to read and interpret the various texts layered, as in opera, on the novel’s language. Woolf, that is, asks her readers to make the transition Barthes outlines in the opening of his essay, “Listening.” “Hearing,” he writes, “is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act” (italics in original, 245).

The way in which the music of Woolf’s prose and the music represented in the novel disrupts and disperses meaning is echoed most obviously in Woolf’s wide-ranging use of poetic and stylistic quotations, which creates a veritable web of intertextuality; it is perhaps for this reason that Woolf characterized herself as under the narcotic influence of her own writing—“word drugged”—while copying the manuscript of Between the Acts (24 December 1940; Diary 5: 346). But it is also apparent in her exploration of the associative qualities of words. Witness, for instance, Mrs. Swithin articulating the

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210 For Caughie, this “concern with the reader” is directly linked to Woolf’s “emphasis on performance” (Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism 12).
211 As Caughie notes, this allusiveness “reminds us that neither the novel nor the play is a discrete literary event. . . . Woolf creates characters who play characters created by La Trobe, who recreates characters from earlier dramas. . . . who are themselves parodies of historical figures, and these figures are characters in. . . . the text of English history” (52-3).
Derridean process by which words endlessly defer meaning as she prepares sandwiches for the villagers:

Why’s stale bread, she mused, easier to cut than fresh? And so skipped, sidelong, from yeast to alcohol; so to fermentation; so to inebriation; so to Bacchus; and lay under purple lamps in a vineyard in Italy, as she had done, often; while Sands heard the clock tick; saw the cat; noted a fly buzz; and registered, as her lips showed, a grudge she musn’t speak against people making work in the kitchen while they had a high old time hanging paper roses in the barn. (23)

Like the pealing of bells, an aural image which Isa invokes to describe the inevitable annual conversation about the weather in relation to the pageant (30), one word leads to a mental image, which leads then to another image, and so on. The particular associations that words call to mind are, like music, simultaneously communal and individualistic: the word “bread” leads Mrs. Swithin to think of yeast, then alcohol, which then brings to her mind the image of Bacchus, a culturally conditioned, shared association with the word, and a remembrance of “lay[ing] under purple lamps in a vineyard in Italy,” a highly idiosyncratic response to the word.

The idea that words proliferate, rather than delineate, meaning, which is narrated in the account of Mrs. Swithin slicing bread in Between the Acts, is explicitly theorized in “Craftsmanship,” the radio broadcast Woolf delivered almost one year to the

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212 This characteristic is antithetical to Giles, who seeks definite answers and action as opposed to the inconclusiveness of “[b]ooks open; no conclusion come to; and he sitting in the audience” (38). Intensely frustrated at having to tolerate idle social chatter and (what he expects will be) a trivial pageant when the world is on the precipice of collapse, or in his words, being “forced passively to behold indescribable horror,” he construes negatively the proliferation of meaning celebrated by the narrative as a whole: “Words this afternoon ceased to lie flat in the sentence. They rose, became menacing and shook their fists at you” (38).
day before the first reference to the work that would become *Between the Acts* appears in her diary. Woolf begins by making the point that the title of her talk is really a misnomer, in part because words have no use value:

When we travel on the Tube, . . . there, hung up in front of us . . . are the words “Passing Russell Square.” We look at those words; we repeat them; we try to impress that useful fact upon our minds . . . . We say over and over again . . . “Passing Russell Square, passing Russell Square.” And then as we say them the words shuffle and change, and we find ourselves saying, “Passing away saith the world . . .” *(Death of the Moth* 127)

What she is getting at here is that although words have lexical, referential meanings, they also have a host of personal and culturally embedded associations that makes it impossible to limit or to contain meaning: “[words] mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person; they are unintelligible to one generation, plain as a pikestaff to the next” (131-2). Note, for instance, the subtle way in which “Passing” drops its uppercase “P” in its second iteration; already, it has lost its original or intended meaning (a word in an instructional phrase) and “passed” into the much more inclusive realm of the lowercase “passing,” a word that, divorced from its context of the sign, now suggests both “the transiency of things, the passing of time and the changes of human life” and, importantly, poetry—specifically, Christina Rossetti’s “Passing Away, Saith the World” *(Death of the Moth* 128-9). The way in which Woolf here demonstrates how words “are full of echoes, of memories, of associations” is very much like the way in which music and sounds work *(Death of the Moth* 129); as Frattarola notes, “[f]ound sound’ samples do not need to be traced to a singular origin in order to signify, and
consequently, they provoke common aural associations; it is for this very same reason, however, that listeners develop individual associations with certain sounds, depending on personal experience” (146). Words are also like music—or more specifically, like musical notes—in that they are “not a single and separate entity, but part of other words.” Like musical notes, which are not music until they are linked to other notes, for Woolf, a word “is not a word . . . until it is part of a sentence” (Death of the Moth 130).

Likely because of Woolf’s resounding use of rhythm and the important role of music in the pageant in Between the Acts, many critics have made this link between Woolf’s exploitation of the “many-sided[ness]” of words and music, generally coming to one of two conclusions. On the one hand, Eisenberg positively argues that “music comes to stand for a variety of non-verbal forms which Woolf hopes might supplement a failing language” (259). More negatively, Julie Vandivere contends that “Woolf us[es] music to empty language of its ability to gesture to something outside of itself and then correlat[es] this linguistic incapacity with our inability to construct subjectivity” (Vandivere 227). I would argue that music in Between the Acts neither supplements a failing language, nor, in its own collapse, represents the breakdown of language and the self, but rather, offers a

213 Vandivere’s argument falls into the latter of the two camps that Marder outlines as the dominant ways of reading Between the Acts, “either as a celebratory hymn [as Nora Eisenberg reads it] or as a kind of dirge for Western civilization [as Alex Zwerdling reads it]” (“Virginia Woolf’s ‘Conversion’” 466). I am more of Marder’s “both-and” opinion: “All of these commentaries identify important elements in the novel, but they underestimate the incongruity of Woolf’s art, her desire to wed creative and destructive forces, her subversive use of parody, her sheer rebelliousness. Between the Acts is antithetical fiction. It presents a Yeatsian compound of gaiety and dread which enables us to see both extremes at once without blurring or loss of definition” (“Virginia Woolf’s ‘Conversion’” 467). Woolf does not silence, for instance, the impending war; indeed, Reverend Streatfield’s post-pageant speech is severed by the “music” of “[t]welve aeroplanes in perfect formation” (115, 114). But neither does this “music” deafen the other themes of the novel, which ends with the possibility that from Isa and Giles’ eventual embrace, “another life might be born” (129).
new operatic model of reading, wherein “the imagination, the memory, the eye and the ear” are all engaged in constructing meaning (Death of the Moth 129). Woolf’s prose does not reflect a rejection of language, but, like her complex use of music, an acknowledgement and an embracing of that which is already a linguistic fact: words are “many-sided, flashing this way, then that” (Death of the Moth 131). To emphasize this point, I want to go back to a caveat I introduced earlier: for all Woolf’s interest in other art forms, she remained always a writer supremely committed to language. Suggesting that Woolf uses “[t]he idea of music as a counterlanguage” that “avoids semantic closure,” as Cuddy-Keane does quite persuasively, is convincing until the next step (which she does not make) is implicitly introduced: that music replaces language, because this then characterizes music as that which transcends language because of its “positive lack of ‘definite articulation’” (“Politics of Comic Modes” 281), a characterization Woolf’s representation of music in both The Waves and Between the Acts rejects. While it is true that “music is capable of containing and sustaining personal associations while still being something the listeners share” (“Politics of Comic Modes” 281), it is also true, as Woolf argues in “Craftsmanship,” that words have this same capability. Woolf does not reject the referential capacity of words or music (indeed, the logic of her critique of La Trobe’s Brechtian project relies on this capacity), but neither does she reject their non-referential capacity, producing a text that is, in yet another sense, indebted to the operatic model, insofar as it makes meaning through both linguistic and “musical” texts.

From the emphasis on the present moment in the repositioning of the audience as actors, to the focus on music in the pageant and the musical text itself, to the exploration
of the open-endedness of words, *Between the Acts* uses operatic strategies to resist closure, creating what Frattarola calls “an overall instability of representation” (155). In this way, it offers an appropriately non-didactic critique of the Brechtian impulse at the heart of La Trobe’s project. The indecisiveness of Isa’s response when, at the end of the day, Mrs. Swithin asks, “Did you feel . . . what he [Reverend Streatfield] said: we act different parts but are the same?” is an apt summation of the inconclusiveness that the novel leaves with its reader: “‘Yes,’ Isa answered. ‘No,’ she added. It was Yes, No. Yes, yes, yes, the tide rushed embracing. No, no, no, it contracted” (127). As in *The Waves*, Woolf here rejects the “overwhelming unity” of “the total work of art,” instead privileging the notion of “orts, scraps, and fragments”—the only phrase that resonates in Isa’s mind after the villagers pack up their costumes and the house settles into its regular rhythm (127). Though Woolf does not explicitly invoke Wagner here as she does in *The Waves*, it is clear that, as Pridmore-Brown writes, “[t]o the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a permanent and totalizing work of art orchestrated by an artist figure who, through rhythm, rhyme, and charismatic lure imposes form on the raw energy of the masses—Woolf opposes a pluralist politics of location” (419). Indeed, the ending of *Between the Acts* leaves us with the most anti-authoritarian sentiment possible: “Then the curtain rose. They spoke” (130). The real play, so the language implies, is about to start, and, like the intervals between the acts, it is to be a representation of the highly provisional, un-authored present moment.

The inconclusiveness of the play’s ending is disconcerting for the playgoers, who are “[u]naccustomed to pageants which do not affirm what is already known” (Miller 153). “And if we’re left asking questions,” an anonymous voice asks at the end of the
pageant, “isn’t it a failure, as a play? I like to feel sure if I go to the theatre, that I’ve grasped the meaning” (118). While La Trobe surely would agree with this voice, Woolf suggests a more democratic possibility.214 As Michael Tratner reads this scene, this uncertainty is itself an indication of the success of La Trobe’s play, despite her own characterization of it as a “failure” (*Between the Acts* 124); the “barrage of critical interpretations interrupting each other” is a sign that the process of critical engagement has begun, as “everyone becomes a critic, refusing simply to submit to the seemingly authoritative interpretation of the Reverend Streatfield” (118).215 La Trobe’s failure in the pageant, in short, is Woolf’s success in the novel, a work that incorporates Woolf’s formidable critical powers into a structure that is, as its author hoped it would be, “in a new method” (23 November 1940; *Diary* 5: 341). Considered in this way, *Between the Acts* emerges as a pedagogical, rather than didactic, text, linked to earlier Woolf works like “How Should One Read A Book” (*Common Reader* 2: 258-70) in its attempt to teach the reader the importance of a discriminating reading practice and its emphasis on “a decentering of authority” (Cuddy-Keane, “Politics of Comic Modes” 274). Though opera is important to *Between the Acts* for the same reason it is important to Brecht—its social text—Woolf’s democratic and pedagogical approach, as opposed to the didacticism of La Trobe’s Brechtian approach, represents an alternative to the dictatorial, authoritarian,

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214 Cuddy-Keane has emphasized Woolf’s “democratic rather than authoritarian” stance in various places (“Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies” 93). While Pound, for instance, wants to teach people what to hear, Woolf wants to teach her readers how to hear. Thus though my analysis of Pound’s operas as translations problematizes Caughie’s remark that “Pound’s slogan, ‘Make it new,’ was an effort to keep art at the vanguard of culture and in the hands of an elite,” I would agree with the spirit of her assertion that “Woolf’s expedient, ‘Break the rhythm’ (*Between the Acts*), is conjoined with an increasing concern for the democratization of art,” though as I have shown, La Trobe’s statements cannot be uncritically conflated with Woolf’s (*Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* 189).

215 Sarker argues that these “expressions of tension and contradiction” parallel modernist musical techniques in that both are “meant to stir critical scrutiny” (164).
masculine language against which both she and her fictional playwright are writing. Against La Trobe’s instruction to “break the rhythm and forget the rhyme,” Woolf’s text argues for the necessity of listening to the rhythm and responding to the rhyme and in so doing breaks the rhythm of patriarchy that La Trobe’s method ironically replicates.
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