



## MAKE IT NEW

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## THE MUSIC COLUMN

by Margaret Fisher

### “DONNA MI PREGA” BETWEEN CAVALCANTI RIME AND CANTO XXXVI

Pound's musical setting of Guido Cavalcanti's philosophical canzone *Donna mi prega* (late thirteenth century) richly rewards the scholar interested in Pound's application of personae, medievalism and rhythmic proportions to his poetry as well as the scholar interested in methods of translation and criticism. The canzone would become the centerpiece of Pound's second opera *Cavalcanti*, composed between 1931 and 1933. Written for radio, the opera emphasizes the hearing (vs. the reading) of Cavalcanti's poetic and philosophic oeuvre. The opera engages with medieval philosophy, at times humorously, as when Pound references Averroës in connection with the *Donna mi prega* aria. Of all the arias in the opera, *Donna mi prega* best demonstrates Pound's conclusion that music composition may function as literary criticism.

### Timeline

- July 1928: Pound's first translation of "Donna mi prega," published in *The Dial* 85.
- January 1932: This same translation is published as *Guido Cavalcanti Rime* by Edizioni Marsano, Genoa.
- Summer 1932: Pound sets "Donna mi prega" to music as an aria for Act II of his opera *Cavalcanti* and at summer's end he sends his score to Agnes Bedford in London for comment.
- April 1934: Pound's new translation of "Donna mi prega" appears in *Harkness Hoot* IV.4: 26–29; and later that year as Canto XXXVI in *Eleven New Poems* (Farrar and Rinehart, NY, October 1934).
- September 1934: Pound writes that music composition may function as literary criticism in the essay "Dateline" (Ezra Pound, *Make It New*, Faber and Faber, London, September 1934).

### **Musical Timeline**

Composed: summer of 1932 by Pound, not performed in his lifetime. The music was considered “lost” or “unfinished.”

Recovered and Reconstituted: by Robert Hughes 1982–1983. Olga Rudge provided Hughes access to music from among her personal papers; Mary de Rachewiltz facilitated Hughes’ access to the uncatalogued music among the Ezra Pound Papers at the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

Concert Premiere: 28 March 1983 at the Herbst Theatre, San Francisco by the Arch Ensemble, conducted by Robert Hughes, sung by Thomas Buckner. Olga Rudge in attendance at the premiere.

Stage Premiere: 13, 14 July 2000 at the Nuovo Teatro di Bolzano by the Conductus Ensemble. Aria arranged and directed by Marcello Fera, sung by Marco Camastra. Produced by Mary de Rachewiltz.

### **Music in translation**

Did Pound’s immersion in music composition influence the new translation?

If so, how?

One way to begin to answer this question is to compare the first two lines of the Italian with Pound’s English 1928 and 1934 translations:

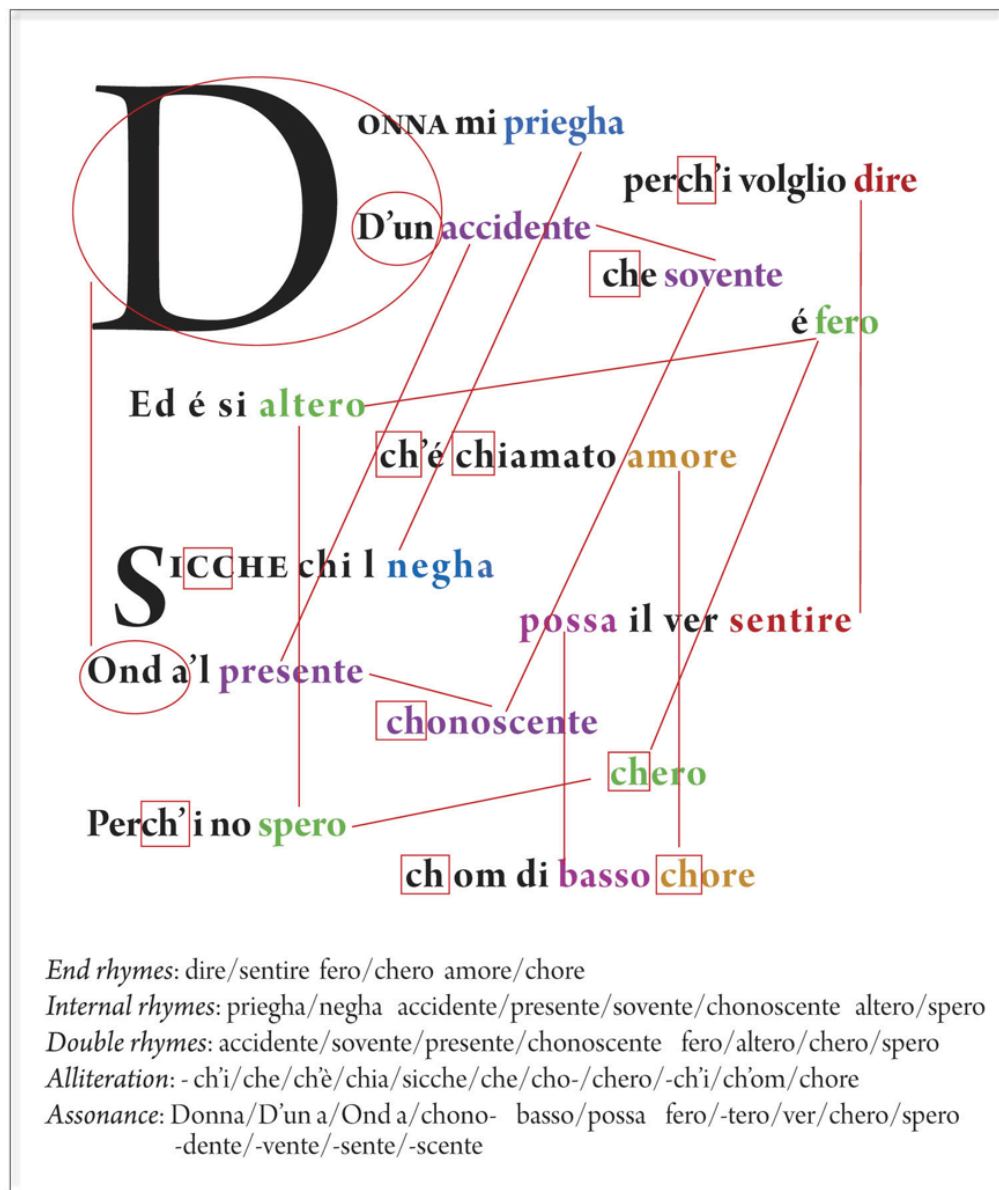
Donna mi priegha /perch’i volgllo dire  
D’un accident / che sovente / é fero

Because a lady asks me, I would tell  
Of an affect that comes often and is fell (1928)

A lady asks me / I speak in season  
She seeks reason for an affect, wild often (1934)

As in the Cavalcanti canzone, end rhymes, double and internal rhymes, assonance and alliteration play a role in both of Pound’s translations. Other clues can be found in the phrasal durations, and in the *posé* and *levé* characteristics of the syllables (Maurice Emmanuel’s terms for long and short values in Greek poetry, Pound’s favored method in the early 1930s for considering syllabic weight [David Gordon, “Ezra Pound to Mary Barnard,” *Paideuma* 23.1:165–170]). Toward an answer, I offer a graphic rendering of Cavalcanti’s sonic scaffolding (example 1) and rhythmic transcriptions of Pound’s reading of Cavalcanti’s poem (example 2) and the musical values Pound assigned his aria, “Donna mi prega” (example 3).

## Example 1

1st six lines, *Donna mi prega* by Guido Cavalcanti

[The words conform to "the manuscript 'Ld', Laurenziano (46-40, folio 32 verso), with a few errors corrected. Accents added from the Giuntine edition" (*Literary Essays* 163). The layout of the poem is from Pound's 1932 edition, *Cavalcanti*. Diagrammatic markings are added by the author.]

*Donna mi prega* offered Pound an example of "timbre-forms" in its cross-bracing patterns of assonance and alliteration that create forms within forms, and account for its expressivity. In addition to the strophic structure, rhyme schemes and line quantities, the cross-referenced smaller forms give the poem a polyphonic dimension.

Pound's term "timbre-forms" is from "Affirmations . . . As for Imagisme" (Jan. 1915). Graph and text by Margaret Fisher, p. 151 from *Le Testament 1923 Facsimile Edition*. Reproduced by permission. Second Evening Art Publishing © 2011. All rights reserved.

## Example 2

(Note: One does not need to read music. Add the top numbers of the fractions given.)

Pound's reading of Canto XXXVI (Caedmon Records, 1958)

Tempo: 72 beats per minute, steady

Durations of syllables measured in 16th note values

The musical notation for Example 2 shows three lines of text with corresponding musical notes and fractions above them. The first line has fractions 9/16, 7/16, 7/16, and 15/16. The second line has 5/16, 5/16, 5/16, and 9/16. The third line has 8/16, 6/16, 4/16, and 18/16. The text is: "A La-dy asks me I speak in sea - son She seeks a rea - son for an af - fect wild of - ten That is so proud he hath Love for a name".

The first and second lines each have a total duration of 24/16. This can be reduced to 3:2, the musical ratio of a perfect fifth.

## Example 3

(Note: One does not need to read music.

See the top numbers of the fractions and/or their translation into musical ratios or intervals.)

Donna mi prega Act II, #3

The musical notation for Example 3 shows three lines of text with corresponding musical notes and fractions above them. The first line has fractions 24/16 (3:2 or perfect 5th), 24/16 (3:2 or perfect 5th), 16/16 (1:1 or unison), and 8/16. The second line has 24/16 (3:2), 16/16 (1:1 or unison), 24/16 (3:2 or perfect 5th), 24/16 (3:2 or perfect 5th), and 24/16 (3:2). The third line has (perfect 5th), 24/16 (3:2 or perfect 5th), 16/16 (1:1 or unison), 12/16 (3:4), 8/16, and 4/16. The text is: "Don - na mi pre - ga per-chio vog - lio di - re D'un ac - ci-den-te, che so - vent' è fe - ro, Ed è si al - te - ro Ch'é chia - ma - to A - mo - re, Sic - che ch'il nie - ga pos - sa'l ver sen - tir - e Ed al pre - sen - te co - no - scen - te che - ro".

\*[Pound presents the upper octave as an option in his MS full score.]

Pound's setting of the poem's first six lines has a duration scheme with these harmonic equivalents:

5<sup>th</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> / unison 5<sup>th</sup> / 5<sup>th</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> // 5<sup>th</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> / unison 5<sup>th</sup> / maj. 3<sup>rd</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> (last 2 not shown)

**Donna mi prega, strophe 1 (43 seconds):**

**Envoi (54 seconds):**

Private recording. Baritone: Joshua Bloom; Piano: Rae Imamura.  
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For more information on Pound's use of phrase duration and line duration in his poetry, see [\*The Echo of Villon in Ezra Pound's Music and Poetry: Duration Rhyme\*](#) (from the *Le Testament 1923 Facsimile Edition*) More examples of duration rhyme are [here](#).

**What Pound said of the aria:**

(Letter, Pound to Agnes Bedford, 20 August 1932, Ezra Pound MSS, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington Indiana).

**“The Donna mi prega is the twister/ tour de force and danger zone”**

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<<http://independent.academia.edu/MargaretFisher/Papers>>