



MAKE IT NEW

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THE MUSIC COLUMN

by Margaret Fisher



“Donna mi prega”
between *Cavalcanti Rime* and Canto XXXVI

Part II



Guido Cavalcanti, terracotta, artist unknown, provenance Florence, now in the Sala del Camino Carrarese, Castello Cini, Società Rocca di Monselice, Monselice, Italia.

Photo: Margaret Fisher

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Part II

This column continues the discussion begun in the first number of *Make It New*. That issue presented avenues of approach to Pound’s setting of Guido Cavalcanti’s canzone “Donna mi prega” to music in 1932 that would inform his second translation of the poem, published as Canto XXXVI. Part II looks at the ways in which Pound used musical composition to comment on Cavalcanti’s poetry.

Music as Criticism

Ezra Pound's setting of "Donna mi prega" (DMP) forms the central number of his second opera *Cavalcanti*. Often referred to as the poet's philosophical canzone, the poem according to Pound expresses Cavalcanti's most original thinking (*LE* 158). Allison Cornish on the other hand, identifies Cavalcanti's philosophy as entirely secondhand (170). The much debated subject of Cavalcanti's promulgation of Averroist interpretations of Aristotle within the poem is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice to say here that Pound's musical setting isolates key moments in the poem that Pound recognizes as Cavalcanti's adjustment to an otherwise secondhand philosophy: "Guido is eclectic, he swallows none of his authors whole" (*LE* 159). Those authors would be St. Thomas Aquinas (b. 1225), Albertus Magnus (b. 1193), Avicenna (b. 980) and Averroes (b. 1126), all of whom expounded upon Aristotle's writings about the issues that enter Cavalcanti's exposition on love: substance, the soul, the intellect and the senses. Cavalcanti's canzone proceeds as an inquiry that follows the technical protocol of the twelfth-century Scholastics, its lexicon suggesting Aquinas and Magnus, but the canzone is written in the vernacular language, not in Latin. This, at a time when autodidacts and political activists such as Cavalcanti and Dante participated in the intellectual culture, operated autonomously, and thrived in a culture of tension between the religious and lay communities (Corti 39)¹

C. S. Lewis' popular 1959 study, *The Allegory of Love*, proposed that the sudden appearance of discourse about love in the Middle Ages, where there had been none in the Dark Ages, could be attributed to a feudal system that competed with the Church for authority and power. Because gallantry did not concern itself with a woman's husband, but with a woman's admirer outside marriage or even a group of competing admirers, Lewis argued that the love religion as expressed in gallantry, poetry, and song of the Middle Ages "begins as a parody of the real religion" arising from and reflecting the social reality of feudal court culture, with its disproportionate number of men to women (Lewis counts the lord, the nobles under him, landless knights, squires, and pages, very few of whom had the option of marriage, against the lord's lady and her damsels) (20, 12). Lewis concludes, "Idealization of sexual love must begin with the idealization of adultery" (13). He counseled us to consider poetry, poetry. Whether one takes this counsel or not, Lewis might lead us to consider Cavalcanti's *canzone* in the vernacular as a poem that advances the troubadour line by means of the Scholastics' techniques, while rejecting their ideas.

Pound's interjection of light banter between Cavalcanti and his friend Guido Orlando in the opera before the poet is about to sing his canzone affords Pound the opportunity to mention *cantus firmus*, a given melody borrowed from earlier sources to which the singers add counterpoint. I will argue that Pound employs *cantus firmus* in the music to set off Cavalcanti's original ideas from the borrowed philosophy expressed in the canzone. Music becomes the composer's means of distinguishing the poet's intent, a form of criticism.

Pound's *cantus firmus* proceeds at a steady tempo of 72 beats per minute, with one syllable assigned to one note. The melody moves stepwise up and down. The slow pace and repetitive rise and fall of the melody create a sense of the medieval religious tradition of using chant to meditate on the significance of words. I would argue that Pound's musical form, the *cantus firmus*, accommodates and conflates two groups to represent them as the voice that extols love's power to elevate the soul. These would be the Scholastics and the troubadours with their respective approaches—a technical language and a pleasing melody. Tibor Serly complained to Pound that

the setting of “Donna mi prega” was tedious because of its “repetitive mid-range rise and fall.” Serly thought the melody ‘came UP to the same point too often” (CMPEP 78).

Wanting to connect Guido’s *canzone* to the Neo-Platonist idea of the generation of light (LE 161), Pound may have used the *cantus firmus* as a way of inducing the *remir*, or intense gaze that prepares the mind for meditation and leads to perception.² When the composer goes on in 1934 to produce his second written translation of the canzone in English, he apparently conceived of his translation as moving at the same 72 beats per minute, the pace at which he reads Canto XXXVI for the 1958 Caedmon recording.

The composer’s method for distinguishing original from secondhand ideas in the canzone will be to have Guido sing much of the canzone at the slow pace, as *cantus firmus*, with a well-placed leap out of its repetitive patterning. The steady pace and repetition allows the listener to hear difference. The visual analogy would be the hypnotic effect created by staring into a fire. Sparks, flying embers are perceived as part of the flame and yet are differentiated or individuated from the flame. At key moments in the aria (see example below, bars 83-87), Pound breaks the spell of the slow, mesmerizing *cantus firmus* with a musical spark—modulation to a new key, introduction of the tritone, a sudden, awkward leap to the octave, or a sustained dissonance that disturbs the harmony and the pattern.

The composer employs several strategies by which the singer as Cavalcanti marks his original, possibly heretical, contributions to the philosophical discourse on love. The first is the use of an extended melodic line. Using notation to indicate the position of notes on the musical staves, Bob Hughes has written, “The canzone’s gamut reaches to an octave and a minor seventh from **B₁** [two octaves and a second below middle C] to **f#** [the augmented fourth above middle C] with an extension upward to ‘a’ [a sixth above middle C] occurring in the *ossia* of bars 8-10.” The extended line is remarkable because “Pound moves the melody along a quick ascent to its apex during the first stanza, an unorthodox approach given the length of the poem” (CPMEP 76).

The composer’s second strategy is the assignment of the tritone to key words in the poem that signal Guido’s voice. The tritone is the interval of the augmented fourth in the musical scale. Spanning three whole steps, the tritone creates a sense of instability in the sound. Also called the *diabolus in musica* (devil in the music), the tritone has a long history. The Akkadians, mid-second millennium BC, singled out the tritone for the discomfort created in the ear and tuned their lyres accordingly (cuneiform tablets, U. 7/80, British Museum).^{*3} Ancient tuning adjustments to work around the tritone produced the music modes.

We have evidence from diverse sources that the composer studied the tritone. Pound opened his poem “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” (1920) with mention of the tritone as a way of characterizing an aesthete “out of key with his time,” disabled by an ultra refinement of perception: “For three years, diabolus in the scale” (*Personae* 185). Pound appears to be saying the same about Cavalcanti, but in a different medium. At any tempo faster than 72 beats per minute, the tritone might not be heard in the “Donna mi prega” aria. Pound received from Antheil a half-page lesson with five examples of the tritone (YCAL 178/4/159, Beinecke Library). He had the example of Stravinsky who used the tritone to represent the dual nature of the puppet hero of *Petrushka* and the supernatural “other” in *Firebird*.

The slow-paced canzone is marked “*Con baldanza*” (with boldness and daring)—perhaps to insure the tritone is heard. Music begins in the key of **F**, but with a tonal center on **E**. The first tritone occurs on the downbeat of the first syllable of the poem, “*Don-*” of “*Donna.*”

Donna mi prega, bars 1–4

Guido Cavalcanti

English Horn (in C)

* tritone

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Audio sample: Donna mi prega: beginning of the aria.

We hear Guido’s tritone twice in the five-note pattern of Guido’s opening melody. The **Bb** in the English Horn and an **E** in the voice launch the poet’s claim of why he is writing on love and that he intends to reply—*Donna mi prega perchio voglio dire*—a technical statement about the formal (the Donna) and efficient (the poet speaking) causes of the poem. A plausible identification of the *Donna* is that advanced by Maria Corti; the Donna is a personification of Wisdom or Philosophy (17). The self-reflexive “*mi*” refers to Guido as poet of the canzone. Because the tritone connects the two as personae, Guido’s technical approach would justify our identification of the two as the poem’s formal and efficient causes.

Pound’s music will bring saliency to the contradiction between the accepted trope—the loftiness that speech lends to love—and Cavalcanti’s description of the difficulty and pain of love in action. In the example below, bars 7-10, the music follows the *cantus firmus*, rising and falling stepwise twice from **F** to **A**. These are the secondhand ideas about love, for which Pound creates a perfect fifth from the local rhythms of each rise/fall (see Henry Cowell’s *New Musical Resources* regarding harmonic equivalences in rhythm).⁴

When we hear the contrasting word *amare* at the end of Stanza 1, we will again hear Guido’s marker. From the first beat of bar 37, building to *amare*, the composer inserts a tritone between the cello and voice, cello and flute. Here, the pleasure or “*piacimento*” of bar 36 that climaxes a list of love’s characteristics—virtú, power, substance, movement and delight—is disturbed by the tritone on “*che*,” a reflexive pronoun in the phrase “*che’l fa dire amare.*” This is an active construction to contrast the poem’s third line passive construction “*ch’è chiamato amore,*” the gist being that Cavalcanti’s idea brought forward by Pound is that love should be known as a verb with a sense of time associated with it, rather than as a noun which is understood independently of time, a distinction that Pound attributes to Albertus Magnus.⁵

Translation into English might contrast the idea of an accepted appellation, “It is called,” with the idea of a questionable or even joking appellation, “you could call it.” Though the pronoun operates as third person, Pound uses the tritone to identify Guido as the philosopher who understands love as movement rather than as substance. A comparison of Pound’s first translation of the opening stanza (1928) with the second translation (1934) shows the second more firmly establishing the contrast between noun and verb form.

Because a lady asks me, I would tell
 Of an affect that comes often and is fell
 And is so overweening: *Love by name.*

...

Or what his active vertu is, or what his force;
 Nay nor his very essence or his mode;
 What his placation; *why he is in verb,*
 Or if a man have might
 To show him visible to men's sight.

(1928, italics added)

A lady asks me, I speak in season
 She seeks reason for an affect, wild often
 that is so proud he hath *Love for a name*

...

What is its vertu and power
 Its being and every moving
 Or delight whereby *'tis called "to love"*
 Or if a man can show it to sight

(1934, italics added)

Donna mi prega, "amore"
 Bars 7 - 10, Line 3 of poem
 Key of F major



Donna mi prega, "amare"
 Bars 36 - 39, Line 13 of poem

Musical notation for the second excerpt. It consists of two staves: a vocal line in treble clef and a cello line in bass clef. The key signature changes from F major to A major (three sharps) in the second measure, indicated by an asterisk and the text 'modulation to A major'. The lyrics 'El piaci-men-to che'l fa di - re a - ma - re' are written between the staves. The cello line has a tritone interval marked with an asterisk and the text '* tritone between cello & voice'.

Excerpts from *Cavalcanti: A Perspective on the Music of Ezra Pound*

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At bar 37 of line 13, Pound abruptly modulates from the key of F major to A major—a disturbing change you can’t ignore emotionally or rationally. Cavalcanti’s original contribution to the discourse on love is easy to hear; it is made additionally salient by a silence that precedes the word *amare*. At the third stanza, Guido comments on the accepted idea that love operates within the “possible intellect,” *Non é virtute ma da questa vene*. The senses assist the intellect in defining what is rare and beautiful. While love is not, its qualities are known by the same mechanism that can identify the rare and the beautiful.

Donna mi prega, bars 83–87

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Guido’s identifying tritone sounds at bar 86 second beat on the word *Non*. We hear this augmented fourth interval in the flute **b** natural/cello **B** natural [a seventh above middle C in the flute and a second below middle C in the cello] against the vocal **f** [an octave and a fourth above middle C]. The octave leap in the voice from **F** to **f**¹, like the single flame that jumps higher than the others, tells us that the words carry special significance.

Guido goes on to say that love is not regulated by reason but by the experience of the senses: “*Non razionale ma che sente, dico*,” one of the more lyrical extended melodic lines of the aria. In his essay “Cavalcanti Medievalism” Pound attributes the idea of proof by experience to Albertus Magnus. Why does Cavalcanti interject his first-person voice as the poet, “*dico*,” at this point? He points to the difficulty of speaking of Love as something rare and beautiful when in fact, it is subject to appetites unregulated by and disproportionate to reason, and therefore mutable. The claim registered, “*dico*,” shows the poet-singer, the psalmist amidst the philosophers established in the opening lines, demanding his share of *intentio auctoris* (the overall direction of the discussion and its articulation as to style and concept), standing up to Aquinas’ teaching that *intentio auctoris* must follow the literal sense of Scripture. (On this, also see Pound’s essay “Cavalcanti” in which he comments on the vocabulary, *LE* 174).

Audio example:

Donna mi prega

Transition from Stanza II into Stanza III: music bars 81–104,

Non a diletto . . . amico. length 01:37

Private recording. Baritone: Joshua Bloom; Piano: Rae Imamura.

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Guido's position in the thirteenth century was at odds with the Church authorities, given the Condemnations of 1270 that banned the teaching of certain Aristotelian and Averroist doctrines, including Averroes' doctrine of a divided soul. Cavalcanti's canzone challenged Church dogma, which held that Love lay solely within God's jurisdiction, dispersed and shaped by his authority. Cavalcanti's account of love was taken up by his Florentine contemporary Dino del Garbo (d. 1327) as an aid toward understanding how to treat love that operates as an erotic passion by considering such love within the context of the other passions, examining the role of external influences, and determining the role of the individual will in the cause, progression, and outcome of the experience of such love (Bird *passim*; Usher 11-19).

I have pointed to Pound's use of the tritone and the octave to distinguish Cavalcanti's original thinking from the troubadours and the Scholastics on the nature of love. My editor asks me, therefore I would like to comment . . . on the respective dissonance and consonance imparted by these intervals and whether Pound intended symbolic meaning assigned to this harmonic difference. Consonance and dissonance were not identified as an "important problem in musical aesthetics" until the nineteenth century.⁶ If Pound intended symbolic difference, the point must be argued within the context of Pound's knowledge of early music gleaned through his association with Arnold Dolmetsch, the early music specialist and author of *The Interpretation of the music of the XVII and XVIII Centuries Revealed by Contemporary Evidence* (1915), and through Pound's own extensive study and transcription of early music manuscripts in the library collections in England, France and Italy. Pound had already used the tritone, the octave interval and sustained dissonance in the Testament opera to what Daniel Albright considered a modernist effect in his book *Untwisting the Serpent* (particularly, "Dame du ciel"). Pound's use of dissonance would catch the ear of his twentieth-century listener. It is an open question whether further symbolic significance should be taken. Given that the octave intervals in the "Donna mi prega" aria occur on textual denials such as "Non è virtute" and "Fuor di salute," it appears to me that within the acoustic unfolding of a slow repetitive canzone, Pound deploys musical gestures that break through the repetitive rising and falling pattern of the melodic line to mark in a dramatic fashion Guido Cavalcanti's original contribution to the discourse on love that ran through the Middle Ages.

Occurrences of the tritone in the opera *Cavalcanti*:

(Musical pitches, but not their position of in the clef/staff, are indicated; passing tone tritones indicate instances in the tritone is not a salient feature of the melody)

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| 1. Era in pensier | bar 105, E-Bb ("nol posso mirare")
bar 68, passing tone tritone B-F ("prim'avea") |
| 2. Donna mi prega | bar 1, E-Bb, ("Donna")
bar 37, Bb-E ("che'l fa dire, amare")
bar 85, passing tone tritone E-Bb ("simiglianza")
bar 86, tritone, reinforced by octave leap, B natural-F ("Non è virtute")
bar 136 passing tone tritone, E-Bb ("con paura")
bar 144, E-Bb ("sospiri") |

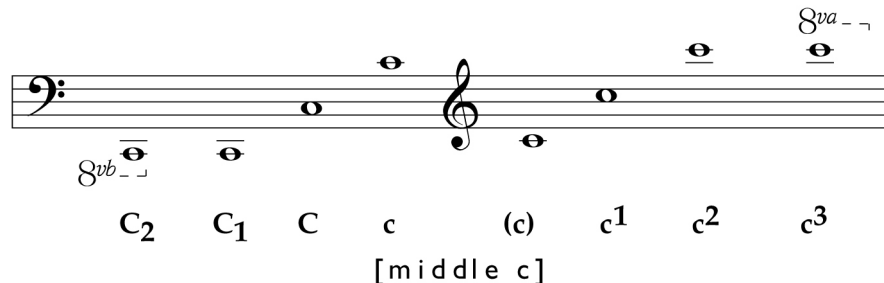
bars 150, 153 passing tone tritone, E-Bb (“la qual manda,” “prova”)
 bars 159, 160, 163, passing tritones, E-Bb (“trovarvi,” “gioco,” “ne poco”)
 bar 208 tritone D#-A (“canzone”)

Occurrences of the interval of the octave in the melody in the opera *Cavalcanti*:

1. Poi che di doglia bar 30 (“ferma opinione in altrui condizione”)
2. Era in pensier bar 115 (“Io dissi: E mi ricorda” - if Pound’s preferred upper octave is taken)
3. Donna mi prega bar 86 (“Non è virtute”)
 bar 96 (“Fuor di salute”)
 bar 163 to 164 (“ne poco” to “Da simil tragge”, with dialogue between) [The interval of a 9th (or an 11th if the *ossia* is taken) in “Sol per pietà,” bar 56, is not included in this list given the aria is sung by Betto. Pound used that aria to show off the voice, offering the tenor a bravura conclusion on a high **c#²** [two octaves above middle C] *alla Verdi*.

The notation of musical pitches

within the text uses capitalized and lower case letters to indicate the octave range of the written pitch.



NOTES

1. For a perspective on the turn to the vernacular, see Alison Cornish, “A Lady Asks: The Gender of Vulgarization in late Medieval Italy” (*PMLA* 115.2).
2. This, remembered from the poetry of troubadour Arnaut Daniel and brought forward in Pound’s Canto XX, “In air, strong, the bright flames, V shaped;/ Nel fuoco/ D’amore mi mise, nel fuoco d’amore mi mise . . .” (XX/92-3).
- 3 I am grateful to the late Lou Harrison for this information.
4. The first two parts of the book, “Tone Combinations” and “Rhythm,” will help elucidate Pound’s techniques regarding the influence of rhythm (or time) on harmony. Chapter headings will give a good idea of the relevance of Cowell’s insights to harmony to Pound’s own harmonic theory: Part I: “The Influence of Overtones in Music,” “Polyharmony,” “Tone-quality,” “Dissonant Counterpoint.” Part II: “Time,” “Metre,” “Dynamics,” “Form,” “Metre and Time Combinations,” “Tempo,” “Scales of Rhythm.”

5. Pound writes, "I guessed right in stressing the difference between Amore (noun) and Amare (verb) in the first strophe. The philosophical difference is that a noun is a significant sound, which makes no discrimination as to time. 'Nomen est vox significativa, ad placitum, sine tempore, cuius nulla pars est significativa separate.' the verb locates in time. 'Verbum logice consideratum est quod consignificat tempus' (Albertus Magnus)" (LE 174).

6. Lang, Paul Henry, *Music in Western Civilization*, NY: W. W. Norton, 1941, 974.

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