

Poetry & Opera issue of Agenda: Web supplement



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James Aitchison has published six collections of poems, the most recent being *Foraging: New and Selected Poems*. His other publications include *The Golden Harvester: The Vision of Edwin Muir* and *The Cassell Dictionary of English Grammar*. His articles on creativity and poetics have appeared in various journals including *Agenda*, *Equinox*, *The London Magazine* and *The Montreal Review*.

James Aitchison

Poetry and Music

When Walter Pater writes in ‘The School of Giorgione’ in *The Renaissance*, first published in 1873: (Pater 1907: p 135) ‘*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*’, he uses italic type to emphasize his concept of an absolute aesthetic that is realized through a union of form and matter. Lyrical poetry, Pater states, is ‘the highest and most complete form of poetry’ because in lyrical poetry ‘mere intelligence’ is ‘reduced to its *minimum*’. And he adds: (Pater 1907: p 138) ‘Art, then, is thus always striving to be independent of mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material’. Intelligence, of course, is not enough, but an artist’s particular mode of intelligence in the making of a work of art will have a vital influence on the nature of the finished work. Artists’ responsibilities to their subjects and materials are equally vital. The meanings in any painting include the painter’s subject matter and use of materials: paints, brushes and palette knives to create colours, textures, thicknesses. And the meanings in any poem include its subject matter, its theme and the poet’s use of and respect for language. To get rid of these responsibilities, as Pater recommends, is to deny not only the particular nature of an individual work of art but also the nature of an entire art form.

* * *

Our capacity for music, like our capacity for language, is innate. In *Musicophilia* Oliver Sacks writes: (Sacks 2011: p 101) ‘There is clearly a wide range of musical talent, but there is much to suggest there is an innate musicality in virtually everyone’. Children from the age of six months can bob and sway to the rhythms of music, and when children begin to speak at about the age of two they can be heard uttering original combinations of words and non-words in the melodies and rhythms of song as well as speech. In the adult mind, songs, melodies, and melodic fragments often play and replay themselves spontaneously.

Anthony Storr discusses this experience in the chapter, ‘Music, Brain and Body’ in *Music and the Mind*: (Storr 1992: p 124) ‘Whenever my attention is not fully engaged, music “runs in my head” involuntarily. [...] I do not understand why some music is so persistent that it is hard to rid oneself of it’. In *Musicophilia* Oliver Sacks discusses the same experience and concludes: (Sacks 2011: p 49) ‘the automatic or compulsive internal repetition of musical phrases is almost universal – the clearest sign of the overwhelming, and at times helpless, sensitivity of our brains to music’. Storr suggests that this kind of spontaneous replay is purposeful: (Storr 1992: p 125) ‘If I am engaged in any occupation not requiring intense concentration, the music which comes unbidden to my mind usually has physical and emotional effects of a positive kind’. And then, in a persuasive insight, he adds: ‘It alleviates boredom, makes my movements more rhythmical, and reduces fatigue. A routine trudge can be transformed into an enjoyable exercise’. It is as if the music in one’s head is private work song, a musical accompaniment to a task; this metaphysical sense of companionship is something that music does supremely well.

We recognize and reproduce melody so readily that we must conclude that our mind is designed for music as well as for rhythm and language. The innateness of a mental capacity usually indicates that it emerged at an early stage in our evolution, as Charles Darwin observes in Chapter

XIX of *The Descent of Man*, first published in 1871. He discusses the production and recognition of musical notes, and then he adds: (Darwin 1981: p 334)

Whether or not the half-human progenitors of man possessed [...] the capacity of producing, and no doubt of appreciating, musical notes, we have every reason to believe that man possessed these faculties at a very remote period, for singing and music are extremely ancient arts.

In the same paragraph Darwin adds that poetry can be considered as the offspring of song. What Darwin discovers through reflection, Oliver Sacks discovers through direct observation. In his Introduction to *Musophilia* Sacks writes: (Sacks 2011: p xii) ‘Our auditory systems, our nervous systems, are indeed exquisitely tuned for music’.

There are other similarities between language and music. The grouping of words in speech is similar to the grouping of notes in a musical phrase. In speech, the pauses do not usually occur between individual words but between clusters of words. Music is similar in that the pauses occur between phrases rather than between single notes. In speech, the length of a word-cluster or a sequence of word-clusters is often determined by the number of words the speaker can utter in one breath; a similar limitation applies to singers and players of wind instruments, although some wind instrumentalists use a technique that allows them to inhale while they are playing. (When I asked a musician in the Royal Scottish National Orchestra how this was done, his reply was ‘Through the anus’.) There are similarities, too, between the rising and falling pitch in the intonation contours of speech and the intonation contours of musical phrases. And there are further similarities between the stress, rhythm, tempo, and loudness of speech and music; the stress-timed nature of English speech is roughly comparable to the beats in a musical bar. The overall structure of a long poem can be compared to the structure of a musical work; a closer structural comparison is probably that of a poem sequence such as a sonnet cycle and a set of musical variations on a theme.

Perhaps it was these similarities, along with the emotional power of music, that led F. S. Flint and Williams, two of the founders of the Imagist movement in poetry, to associate poetry so closely with music that they mistakenly defined poetry in musical terms. Ezra Pound makes a similar identification in *ABC of Reading*. In the prefatory ‘Warning’ he states his conviction: (Pound 1951: p 14) ‘that music begins to atrophy when it departs too far from the dance; that poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music’. And he repeats the conviction in Chapter Six: (Pound 1951: p 61) ‘Music rots when it gets too far from the dance. Poetry atrophies when it gets too far from music’. In *ABC of Reading* Pound is unconvincing on the subject of music. In the final chapter, ‘Treatise on Metre’, he states: (Pound 1951: p 200) ‘Music in the past century [1850 to 1950] of shame and human degradation slumped in large quantities down into a soggy mass of tone’. But in Chapter One he commends the music of Debussy and Ravel. In the section, ‘Exercise’ he writes: (Pound 1951: p 151) ‘Dowland, Lawes, Young, Jenkins, the period of England’s musicianship’. John Dowland was a composer, singer and lutanist. William Lawes composed songs, madrigals and music for the stage; his older brother, Henry, wrote the music for Milton’s masque, *Comus*, in 1634. William Young was a composer, viol player and flautist. John Jenkins wrote over eight hundred instrumental works. Pound might have heard enough of seventeenth-century English music to make an informed judgement, but that seems unlikely.

H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) comments on Pound’s knowledge of music in *End to Torment: a Memoir of Ezra Pound by H. D.* The Memoir is in the form of a journal from March 7 to July 13, 1958, the year Pound was released from a mental hospital. In her entry for May 17, H. D. refers to Pound’s opera, *Villon*, and she states (Doolittle 1980: p 49) that the music ‘must have been transcribed by some musical expert’, clearly implying that Pound himself could not read or write music. Pound’s one-act opera, *Le Testament de François Villon*, was written in 1920-1921; the music was transcribed by the American composer, George Antheil, who was then twenty-one years old. In the same journal entry, H. D. says of Pound: ‘He seemed unintimidated by the fact that (to my mind) he had no ear for music and, alas, I suffered excruciatingly from his clumsy dancing’. Edith Sitwell met Antheil at a party in London. In her letter of circa January 17, 1925 to the English

poet, John Freeman, she writes (Sitwell 1998: p 52) of ‘the young pianist and composer George Antheil, so much admired by Mr. Ezra Pound (who knows nothing about music)’.

Sitwell’s witty sequence, *Façade*, first published in 1922, plays with the poetic resources of prosody and relates them to musical properties of pitch, syncopation and counterpoint. *Façade* was set to music by William Walton, but even without the music the poems – for example, ‘Trio for Two Cats and a Trombone’, (Sitwell 1982: pp 120-1) ‘Fox Trot’, (pp 137-8) and ‘I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside’, (Sitwell 1982: pp 153-4) – still dance on the page in entertaining, sometimes nonsensical, ways. In ‘Notes on the Nature of Poetry’ in *A Poet’s Notebook* Sitwell states (Sitwell 1943: p 16) that in two poems in *Façade*, ‘By the Lake’ and ‘Four in the Morning’, along with ‘Daphne’ in *Five Songs*: ‘the rhythmical element has produced the music’.

But a sustained comparison of poetry and music will uncover more differences than similarities. Music, like language, is an abstract symbolic system of expression and communication that can be realized in sound and in writing. Music is the more abstract of the two. Most words in a language have extra-linguistic referents; that is, words usually refer to things other than language itself and often denote external physical realities. In music, by contrast, there are no such links, not even in song, opera, or oratorio, because in these musical forms it is the words and not the music that convey referential meaning. The sounds and the written notations of instrumental music have no agreed referents. Music can be written, performed, and heard without reference to any order of reality other than music itself.

Most forms of music proceed by repetition, only one form of which, variations on a theme, is found in modern poetry. The refrain, that is, one or more lines repeated at the end of each stanza or second stanza of a poem, is seldom used in poetry today, mainly because it is seen as an artificial, needlessly repetitive device. Music routinely uses the immediate repetition of phrases and melodies, and the structured or delayed repetition of a major theme in a later movement of the work. Repetition in music is conventional: composers accept that it is the way in which music is composed. But it is also functional: if there were no repetition, then the listener, and perhaps some performers, would be unable to detect the internal figures that are essential in developing the overall structure of the work. One reason why listeners have difficulty in enjoying some modern music is the lack of repetition, especially of recognizable melodies and rhythms.

The writing system of musical notation is roughly comparable to an alphabetical writing system in that each proceeds horizontally by linear progression, bar by bar and line by line. But musical notation also proceeds vertically, or simultaneously, by chords and harmonies. A keyboard instrument, for example, can produce ten notes simultaneously; a group of instruments, say, a string quartet, can produce a variety of musical effects simultaneously: two or more chords, harmonies, melodies, rhythms, and even tempos. Language has no such simultaneous functions; the nature of our writing system makes it impossible to achieve the simultaneity of music. Poetry can partly escape from linearity through typography and layout, but few poets write good poems by contradicting the linear nature of the writing system and the natural rhythms of the language.

* * *

Music can produce a more immediate and intense emotional response than poetry, and this suggests that there is a close relationship between music and emotion, both of which were formerly thought to be functions of the right hemisphere of the brain but are now known to be functions of both hemispheres. Weeping in response to music is a mainly adult experience; young people up to and beyond the age of adolescence are often excited by music but seldom moved to tears by it. Perhaps music exerts its emotional influence only on people who have neural networks that have already been shaped by emotion, that is, people whose minds have been affected by the joys and sorrows of life.

Steven Pinker in the chapter provocatively entitled 'The Meaning of Life' in *How the Mind Works* suggests that we are conditioned to react in certain ways to certain kinds of music: (Pinker 1998: p 532) 'A person merely has to listen to melodies in a particular idiom over time, absorbing the patterns and contrasts among the intervals, and the emotional connotations develop automatically'. When the idiom changes, for example, from Russian romanticism to the music of Prokofiev and Stravinsky; or, in the work of a single composer, from Copland's *Piano Variations* in 1930 to his popular ballets, *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo* – when the idiom changes, the new music may seem challenging or, if there is nothing in our experience to which the new work can be related, it may seem alien. The neuroscientist, Daniel Levitin, is more specific than Pinker. In 'Anticipation' in *This Is Your Brain on Music* Levitin writes: (Levitin 2007: p 117) 'By the age of five, infants have learned to recognize chord progressions in the music of their culture'.

An example of this in British culture is – or was until the late twentieth century – the seemingly spontaneous reaction to the emotional power of English hymns. In fact, the reaction was conditioned, mainly through seasonal rehearsals of the hymns in British primary and secondary schools and daily performances at morning assembly. The repetition became a form of imprinting in the young person's mind, and when the adult mind recognized the imprint, then the adult felt the emotional reassurance, the sense of community, and perhaps a sense of innocent childhood, that came with that kind of recognition.

Music enters the listener's mind as a series of auditory sensory impressions that are sometimes closely related to emotion, whereas the auditory sensory impressions of the words of a poem are instantly transduced to the various kinds of poetic meaning: connotative, figurative, experiential, aesthetic. Poetry and music come together in song, and neuroscientists report that some patients whose speech is pathologic as a result of a stroke or a brain injury can sometimes pronounce words clearly when they sing. In *Musicophilia* Oliver Sacks reports (Sacks 2011: p 239) that after six weeks of melodic intonation therapy a patient who had been speechless, aphasic, for eighteen months was able to have short conversations. And in *This Is Your Brain on Music* Daniel Levitin writes: (Levitin 2007: p 127) 'The brain's music system appears to operate with functional independence from the language system'. And he concludes: 'This told us that attending to structure in music requires both halves of the brain, while attending to structure in language only requires the left half'.

When the language areas of the patients' brains are damaged, some patients can recall the song's words as musical notes rather than as words. These clinical studies confirm what poets have known for centuries: the two systems, the auditory and the semantic, can be activated simultaneously by rhyme and other literary sound effects, and that our auditory memory of the sounds of words is distinct from our semantic memory of the meanings of words.

Another measure of the unequal emotional relationship of words and music is that the words of popular songs, hymns, operatic arias, and lieder-like songs from the concert repertoire are often acceptable when they are sung but sound trite if they are uttered without the music or are read as texts. As Philip Hobsbaum notes in 'Verse Forms' in *Metre, Rhythm and Verse Form*: (Hobsbaum 1996: p 184) 'It is possible for an entertainer such as Frank Sinatra to impart to a trivial love song a great measure of intensity. This does not make the love song any the less trivial. The intensity is in the performance'. Professional singers sometimes perform works in languages that they cannot speak and, apart from the pieces in their repertoire, cannot understand. In rehearsing a new work in a foreign language, the singer concentrates primarily on the words' musical notations, their phonetic values, and the phonology of the intonation contours, that is, the characteristic recurring patterns of pitch, or tone, created by clusters of words in a language.

That claim is confirmed in almost every performance of Joseph Canteloube's *Chants d'Auvergne*, written between 1923 and 1930. The work includes a sequence of nine songs for soprano and orchestra, and an alternative version for soprano and piano. The words of the songs are in a regional, rural dialect of Auvergne in the Central Plateau in France. That dialect is unlikely to be

the first language of the singer. In song, poetry and music are not equal partners. When instrumentalists or singers are presented with new and challenging pieces of music, they may be struck by works' emotional quality and they will wish to express that quality in performance, but in the course of learning the new work they must partly suspend their emotional responses in order to master the sequence of sounds.

Cinema offers different illustrations of music's emotional power. From the viewpoint of the film director, the main purpose of the music is to influence the cinema audience's emotional response to and involvement in the drama on the screen. For the director, then, film music is most effective when, irrespective of its loudness, it operates at the threshold of the audience's consciousness, a level at which the music is not heard as sounds and rhythms and figures issuing from an external source but is experienced as internal emotional cues in the minds of the viewers. In effect, what some members of the audience experience is not music but a sequence of seemingly spontaneous emotions. Film music can be as complex and challenging as contemporaneous orchestral music, and there is an irony in the fact that countless millions of cinema-goers have enjoyed, if only subliminally, music they would not have chosen to listen to in the concert hall, on radio, or on record.

* * *

Later in *Musicophilia* Sacks makes an even greater claim for the power of music when he writes: (Sacks 2011: p 332) 'As music seems to resist or survive the distortion of dreams or parkinsonism, or the losses of amnesia or Alzheimer's, so it may resist the distortion of psychosis and be able to penetrate the deepest states of melancholia or madness, sometimes when nothing else can'. The powers of music lead Geoffrey Hill to speak of his envy of the composer. In an interview with John Haffenden published in *Viewpoints* Hill says of the composer: (Hill 1981: p 91) 'he unites solitary meditation with direct, sensuous communication to a degree greater than the poet'. Music is more direct because its sounds go straight to the emotional centres of the brain whereas the reader of a poem has to decode the words for meanings before the poem can make its emotional and intellectual appeal. Hill adds:

In the first instance musical composition is the scratching of pen upon paper but then these signs are translated into the immediate sensuous configurations of sound, the actual iconic presence of brazen instrument and shaken air, in a way that poets can only envy.

Although the emotional impact of music can be powerful and lasting, emotion is not the only response to music. An instrumentalist playing in a group – a string quartet, a chamber or symphony orchestra, a big band – is simultaneously aware of the sound of his own instrument and the sounds of all or most of the others. These kinds of awareness, which are intellectual as well as emotional, are not available to the poet. The player, like the conductor, may also be aware of the structure of each musical figure within the wider structure of the movement, and of the structure of the movement within the whole work. The creative impulse is essentially an emotional force, but the creative imagination must combine emotion and intellect, feeling and thought, in order to create a coherent work of art. When composers orchestrate large-scale instrumental works such as a symphony or concerto, or when they write the parts for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra for an opera or an oratorio, the composers must think logically and analytically in order to achieve the extraordinary precision required. Few poets today are capable of that kind of sustained, intricate creativity.

Geoffrey Hill expresses envy but poetry can express thoughts and feelings that are beyond the power of music. Poetry, that is, can express almost all forms of human experience.

Kim Moore, 30, is a chosen young Broadsheet in the Poetry & Opera issue of *Agenda*. She works as a peripatetic brass teacher for Cumbria Music Service. In 2011 she was awarded an Eric Gregory Award and the Geoffrey Dearmer prize and in 2012 she won The Poetry Business pamphlet competition. Her first pamphlet *If We Could Speak Like Wolves* was published by Smith/Doorstop in May 2012. She has been published in *The TLS*, *Poetry Review*, *Poetry London*, *The Rialto*, *Ambit*, *Magma* and *The North* and her reviews have been published in *Poetry Review*, *Mslaxia*, *Staple* and *Cadaverine*. She was a Ledbury Young Poet-in-Residence in 2012 and blogs at www.kimmoorepoet.wordpress.com

Kim Moore

My Collaboration with Steven Jackson

I met Steven Jackson, a postgraduate composition student at an event that was like a speed dating afternoon. Poets on the MA in Creative Writing course at Manchester Metropolitan University were invited along to the Royal Northern College of Music to meet postgraduate composition students. The poets each read a couple of poems. The composers played a bit of their compositions, and then we were left to 'network', in the hope of forming a partnership that would produce a short collaborative piece to be performed at a concert. One piece would be awarded the Rosamund Prize for that year – which is named for the street that runs between the two institutions.

After listening to everyone's pieces, the one that struck me the most was the piece that Steve had created with the poet Eileen Pun, which the year before had won the Rosamund Prize. As well as a small amount of money, the real prize is the chance to write an opera. I didn't even know if I wanted to write an opera – I didn't know if I could.

Steve and I began to communicate by email. As soon as Steve said he wanted to write a song cycle for soprano that would be suitable to be used as an audition piece, the drama queen in me came out, and I sent him a set of relationship poems. I hope that the poems investigate the different states of mind of a woman in a relationship. I wanted them to interrogate concepts of ownership, marriage and power. What surprised me was the way Steve brought out humour in one poem that I'd not seen with the way he scored the melodic line and accompaniment. It also taught me that I'm not precious about my poems at all – one of the poems Steve repeated a line throughout the song, making it into a kind of refrain. In another, he asked if he could cut a line, and I was quite happy for him to do this. In fact, afterwards, I cut it out of the poem as well. In a way, this was quite a hands off collaboration. It was interesting to see which poems Steve chose to set to music and the way he wove them into a

narrative. The song cycle is called 'At Your Feet' and can be found at <http://youtu.be/9yQzsRm1IIE>

We didn't win the Rosamund Prize, but we have worked together since then. We extended the song cycle and Steve came to do an Improvisation and Composition workshop with my junior brass band that I run in Cumbria, which worked brilliantly.

For me, poetry and music are two extremes, or two completely separate worlds, and most of the time I like to keep them that way. I don't mean practically, I'm talking psychologically. Practically, I hear music in words and I love the rhythm of words and how a line in poetry can balance beautifully like a phrase in music. But in my psyche they are complete opposites for me. Music has always been hard work for me, in that it never came naturally. As a musician I'm beset with doubts. I think that makes for a good teacher though – because I have had to think about how to overcome the many and numerous problems I've come up against.

Poetry in comparison feels easy. Not that it does not involve hard work, and hours of writing, reading, but it just doesn't feel like hard work. I've always got quite stressed about music and constantly worried about whether I was good enough – and I've never had those concerns in poetry. Not because I think I'm the perfect poet, but in poetry it seems so much easier to make mistakes. If I write a dodgy poem and take it to my poetry group, they will just tell me it's a dodgy poem, and I can chuck it if I agree with them. If I turn up to play Handel's *Messiah*, and play the trumpet solo out of tune, I'll be known forever as the trumpet player who played sharp throughout *The Trumpet Shall Sound*.

I would definitely collaborate with Steve again, if time and the opportunity came up. There will always be this tension between music and poetry for me – but I would still take the opportunity to hobnob at the Royal Northern and pretend I belong there again.

John Greening has published more than a dozen collections including *Hunts, Poems 1979-2009* and *To the War Poets* from Oxford Poets (Carcanet, November 2013). He has published guides to Yeats, Ted Hughes, Hardy, Edward Thomas, First World War Poets and the Elizabethans and a recent *Poetry Masterclass*. A regular reviewer with the TLS and a judge for the Eric Gregory Awards, Greening has received the Bridport Prize, the TLS Centenary Prize and a Cholmondeley Award for his poetry. He is currently editing Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* for OUP.

John Greening

HOME: *a libretto in search of a composer*

Home was originally conceived as something halfway between an oratorio and a one-act opera. It concerns the life and activities of the nineteenth-century Scottish-American medium, Daniel Dunglas Home (pronounced *Hume*), one of the most extraordinary characters of his time. Home was often called a fraud, but in fact passed every 'test' he was ever set, much to the dismay of the Victorian scientific community. He was rather a weak individual in himself, but was able to confound the moguls of the industrial revolution with his magic. His fame coincides with the rise of Spiritualism, which was partly a reaction to the materialism of the age. Home left Scotland when he was nine and became a citizen of the world (he married a Russian). That search for a true home is one of the punning preoccupations here, as it was in my collection, *The Home Key* (2003). The verse/prose text mixes narrative with a series of dramatic set-pieces – various seances, the investigation by William Crookes, a set-to with the Brownings – and provides scope for a mixture of choral and solo work, accompanied by whatever forces are available, but especially percussion. There is a great deal of musical and theatrical potential in some of the more bizarre incidents recorded, where apparently bells rang, tambourines were shaken, grand pianos floated across the room...

HOME

CAST

WOMAN, whose role is as narrator: spoken, not sung

DANIEL DUNGLAS HOME, a Scottish/American medium

WILLIAM CROOKES, an English scientist

HOME'S AUNT

HOME AS A BOY

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING, poet

ROBERT BROWNING, poet

SIR DAVID BREWSTER, eminence grise

of the British Association for the Advancement of Learning

CHORUS: which could be incorporated in any number of ways, but should suggest a group that might have gathered for a seance, perhaps diverse Victorian ‘types’. Some of the minor characters (**BOY, AUNT, THE BROWNING, BREWSTER** etc) and the **WOMAN** could emerge from this group (or she could be a more modern, separate figure). Whenever the **WOMAN** is narrating, there should be singing or sound effects. Generally, prose is spoken, verse sung.

HOME is printed in the sung text as it is pronounced – Hume – to avoid confusion.

Stage directions are deliberately kept to a minimum in the hope that an imaginative, non-naturalistic staging would emerge from the text itself and the musical setting. An overture would probably be advantageous to prepare the mood of the opening seance.

A seance is in progress as the lights come up.

CHORUS

At home. The candles sway and dim.
The carpets seem to rise. He’s come.
He joins our circle, smiles.

HOME AS A BOY (*could be invisible, a high voice from the seance*)

Papa!
There’s a heart beating in my chair!

CHORUS

Silvery glow. Icy gales.
Rap! The table. Distant bells
and wave-break, pipe and creak
of rigging. A gull’s cry. You shake,
as warm and human fingers clasp
your hand, tap out the names you ask
while he sits in tranquillity
tight-lipped and far away.

HOME (*grown up, steps into light*)

They call me fraud.

CHORUS

But if he is, he has fooled the world.

HOME

They call me cheap.

CHORUS

But if he is, he has charged no fee.

HOME

They call me crook.

CROOKES (*suddenly visible on other side of stage*)

But if he is, then so am I.

CHORUS

Crookes the scientist has seen
his accordion play one-handed
'There's no place like home...'

CROOKES

And if he hid a harmonica
behind his bushy moustache,
I did not spot it

CHORUS

transported by an accordion
in sweet discord with all
good sense and learning
'Home, Home, Sweet Sweet Home...' *etc. (continues beneath narration)*

WOMAN (*perhaps stepping from the CHORUS, or even from the audience*)

Home was the village of Currie, near Edinburgh, where he was born in 1833 at the Vernal Equinox. He inherited his mother's second sight and even when he was taken to live with a childless aunt and then (at the age of nine) moved to America, the gift stayed with him.

AUNT (*also emerging from CHORUS*)

He is just a wee young lad

CHORUS

who will elongate himself by a foot

AUNT

He has such delicate hands

CHORUS

that will pick up burning coals from the fire

AUNT

His lungs are gey inflamed

CHORUS

yet will raise him to the roofs of royal palaces

HOME (*voice rises against narration, together with humming and rapping*)

I am Hume. Daniel Dunglas Hume... etc

CHORUS

We call you Home... etc

WOMAN

When he was thirteen, he saw a vision of his friend, making three circles in the air to tell him that he had died three days before. Next, he foresaw the death of his own mother. And then, the rappings began. (*Sound effects*)

AUNT

So ye've brought the devil to my house, have ye?

WOMAN

[*His aunt threw a chair at him. Then she threw him out of the door – followed by his Sunday suit.] *may be omitted if acted out

Now began his career as a medium, at a time when (following the sensation of the Fox sisters) there were 15,000 rapping their way out of America.

CHORUS

We call you Home... etc

HOME

But I am Hume, whom
they summon to the palaces of Europe,
whom they offer meals and jewels
to see elevate a chair, fly
through a window, or send a grand
piano floating across the room,
to have Napoleon Bonaparte
appear and clasp his daughter
and sign his name – (*rap!*)
to answer your questions – (*rap!*)
to endure your rebukes – (*rap! rap!*)
whom no one proves a fraud.

CROOKES

Unless Crookes is a fraud

CHORUS (*whisper-singing behind narration and soloists*)

It's all trickery
chicanery
cunning
Americanery

His power is
undeniable
the witnesses
are reliable

A circus-act
a mockery
a lot of
jiggery-pokery

The manifestations
are deepening
the evidence
is ripening

WOMAN

They tried their best to catch him out. As Mrs Browning remarked:

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Everyone would be delighted to disbelieve in him.

ROBERT BROWNING

That dungball!

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Particularly my husband.

WOMAN

But he was hard to catch out. He performed by daylight, in the houses of strangers; he brought no bag of tricks, and always allowed people to inspect for wires and mechanisms. Sir David Brewster himself was down on all fours beneath a hovering table, but publicly denounced Hume. Faraday would only examine him if he first denied that the supernatural could exist. It was left to young William Crookes to do the job. The scientists waited, assured that he would pronounce Hume a fraud.

CHORUS

Unless Crookes is a fraud...

CROOKES

A galvanometer, a thermometer,
an accordion in a metal cage,
wrapped round with insulated wire...

CHORUS

Horror! Shame! Disgust! Outrage!
Disgrace to a scientific age!

CROOKES

Two Grove's cells, an electro-magnet,
one spring balance fixed to a beam
to test the pressure put upon it...

CHORUS

Damnation! The devil! In God's name!
Does this crooked snakeback have no shame?

CROOKES

Clear head, strong electric light,
and scepticism's sharp-eyed checks
that grey is grey, not black or white

CHORUS

Ubi Crux, Ibi Lux
Our Mr Sludge
Has fooled young Crookes.
Poor weak-eyed judge.
We bear no grudge.
Ubi Crookes, Ibi Spooks.

WOMAN

Authority on sanitation, vacuum tubes, electric lighting, diamonds, beetroot and techniques of dyeing (with a y,e,) – William Crookes maintained Hume's honesty to the end.

CHORUS

Unless it is true Hume was found
with a vial of oil of phosphorus...

HOME

But why should I?

CHORUS

Or seen to ease a bare foot out of
his slipper to touch the arm of the empress...

HOME

I solemnly swear...

CHORUS

Or spotted twitching as those spectral
hands moved...

HOME

I do not produce these phenomena...

CHORUS

...those hands so similar
to hands he sculpted in his studio...

HOME

I know no more of them than you!

CHORUS

...with such fidelity to life.

ROBERT BROWNING

If you are not out of that door in half a minute,
I will fling you down the stairs!

HOME

How Browning hates me.

CHORUS

Because he saw garlands showered
on his believing beloved

HOME

And Dickens.

CHORUS

Because he thought walking spirits
hamfatters' humbug

HOME

And all those scientists...

CHORUS

Because they say you are a Fox
cub rattling the credulous
bin-lids of a blind-alley
century

SIR DAVID BREWSTER (*old man defiantly emerging from CHORUS*)

And spirit is the last
thing we will give in to.

HOME

I only wanted to be loved.

CHORUS

And are you home now
in the spirit world
science does not want
to exist? The universe
Copernicus extinguished,
sparks in our medieval
blanket that will become
a power-house for
a future century?

WOMAN

Daniel Dunglas Hume endured public scandal and humiliation, personal tragedy, and the loss of his psychic potency. He faced a world divided for and against him. But he remained and still remains one of the few mediums never to have been exposed. His powers and the sources of those powers were a mystery – even to himself – to the very end.

He died of tuberculosis in 1886, at the Summer Solstice. (*Exit*)

CHORUS

Homo Sapiens in a henge
of stony-hearted blocks, arranged
to look like order, but whose fame
will be the sacrifice of dream,
all human possibilities,
all unexplained anomalies
by sunrise. In it, we are taught
to stay at heel, to keep our feet
firmly on the earth. We know
the truth is in these stones, and who
would risk their neck to look beyond
grey bars of reason at the sun,
blinding monolithic law
where Daniel Dunglas Hume traced pure
incredibilities of hope,
before he fell into the sleep
of history that claims us all,
wizard, scientist or fool?

Blackout

N S Thompson works as a translator. Recent poetry in *Able Muse* (USA), *New Walk*, *The Spectator* and *Stand*. Selections from his most recent book *Letter to Auden* (Smokestack, 2010) were first published in *Agenda*. Currently working on creating a poetry performance with synthesizer and sound effects, but hopes to find a composer to work on the *Ceyx and Alcyone* libretto.

CEYX AND ALCYONE: *Libretto for an opera in two acts*

(after Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XI)

Parts:

Ceyx, King of Trachis/*Morpheus*, son of Somnus

Peleus, an exile

Alcyone, wife of Ceyx

Juno, Queen of Olympus

Iris, her messenger

Somnus, God of Sleep

Chorus of attendants in Trachis, chorus/dancers of dreams in Somnus's cave.

ACT ONE

Scene 1: In the city of Trachis on the Aegean, King Ceyx receives the exile Peleus.

Ceyx: Am I the son of Lucifer,
 Night star, a light
 For one who comes as voyager
 Drawn to the sight?

Peleus: Ceyx, King of Trachis, that is known
 For peace, your port
 Is safety and to you we rowed
 Exiled and sought
 The beacon of your land, King Ceyx!

Ceyx: Who is it speaks?

Peleus: One stunned by grief, whose spirit aches...

Ceyx: But one who seeks?

Peleus: Safe harbour for his men and flocks
Crammed long on board,
My pacing horde facing the rocks
Of exile, bored.

Ceyx: Set them on land, let them all feed:
I will provide
A grove with shade and all they need.
Here, bring a guide!

[A servant is dispatched. Off stage, Peleus's men and flocks are landed.]

Ceyx: Now courtesy demands the name
Of strangers, those
In exile, suffering guilt or shame
From slings or bows.

Peleus: My name is Peleus, I come
With little crew;
My guilt is great, shame burdensome:
Phocus I slew.

Or well, perhaps, it was not quite
Like that: upon
My word, the spite, that fatal quoit
By Telamon

Hit home! O but I share the guilt,
And jealousy,
Yes, with my brother I have killed
Him shamefully.

Ceyx: So we are bound by mourning, grief
Unites us,
And from that there is no relief.

Peleus: You knew Phocus?

Ceyx: I have bereavement of my own
Enough to bear
For sorrowing: Daedalion!
You see up there,

My battle-hearted brother beats his wings,
Become a bird, it is absurd.
Can you give credit to such things?
Become a bird, it is absurd.

Now he draws circles in the air and swoops
On prey, a hawk: he can but squawk,

Performing perne and gyre and loop-de-loops
On prey, a hawk: he can but squawk!

Peleus: Become a bird: it is absurd!

Ceyx: But rest assured it is the grief
Unites us.
And from that there is no relief.

Peleus: O Phocus!

Ceyx: Become a bird of prey, a hawk
It is absurd... can only squawk...

[Peleus asks how it happened]

Ceyx: All brass and polish till his daughter Chione
Was courted by Olympians

Athletically forceful and in rivalry.
Eventually she bore them twins:
Apollo fathered Philammon,
Hermes Autolycus.

.....
....What a fuss!

[Peleus asks more]

Ceyx: What was engendered there?
Another jealous beauty in the groves,
Diana had enough of mortal loves
And shot a mortal arrow through the air.

Chorus: Daedalion
Grief stricken
Chione
Heart stricken

Flames quicken
Daedalion
Grief stricken
Chione
Flames quicken

Ceyx: He flung himself onto the pyre,
Fierce nature at one with the fire.

Chorus: Attracted, distracted,
Fierce nature with the fire
Attracted. They acted

Ceyx: And pulled him from the flames

Chorus: Daedalion... Chione...
Flames flicker round the names...
Daedalion... Chione...

Ceyx: Spark of her pyre flamed him to rise,
Parnassus in his eyes.

Chorus: Outstripping men beyond the pines
That rise above the terraces of vines.
Launched from an outcrop, now he flies
There with Parnassus in his eyes...

Ceyx: Instead of grave
The mercy of a god gave
Him the body of a hawk:
He can but squawk .

Chorus: A hawk, a hawk.

Enter Alcyone. [singing aria of love?]. In turn, Ceyx sings a paeon of praise for Alcyone, and introduces her to Peleus, who sees their joy in one another. Alcyone becomes embarrassed, then humble, not wishing to disturb the gods, on whom they depend for mercy. [”We are at the mercy of the gods/They ravage us and savage us]. Ceyx agrees, saying that Daedalion lost his life for pride (seen through his daughter), and was transformed into a bird by Apollo out of mercy, rather than lose his life forever.

Ceyx: Beware of pride! We love our bodies so
We tone and tan our precious hide
And love the beauty of our bodies so
But yet the gods will override
Us, ride us, take our bodies, throw
Our lives into confusion! Pride
Will be our ruin, let it go!

Scene 2. Enter a herdsman, who says a wolf is savaging Peleus’s flocks.
TRIO: Ceyx prepares to go and kill the wolf. Alcyone pleads with him not to go. Peleus prays to Thetis (his wife, the sea nymph, mother of Achilles) and succeeds in calming the sea-goddess Psamathe. The wolf is turned to marble. Thinking he has brought harm to the peaceable kingdom, Peleus decides he has caused enough disturbance and must go elsewhere.

DUET: Ceyx has to know the meaning of grief, why men suffer and why they are at the mercy of the gods. He decides to go to Delphi and ask the oracle. Alcyone says that this is another kind of pride, he should not go, he will be struck down. All that mankind can truly know is love.

Ceyx: Do you know why men suffer, meaning grief?
.....

Do you know what can only bring relief?
I will take wisdom from Apollo's leaf
And touch the laurel on Parnassus, site
Of oracles, the Pythia who might
Interpret for me action, wrong and right
And with the answer bring respite.

Alcyone: I mourn the day of parting, meaning grief,
And suffer your desire to know relief,
Do you not know.....
Come take a lesson from the myrtle's leaf
And leave the laurel on Parnassus side,
No matter how much grief you have to hide
You have not been accused of fratricide...

ACT II

Scene 1. Trachis. Ceyx sets sail. Storm. All hands perish. Ceyx's last thoughts and words are for Alcyone.

Scene 2. Alcyone is sleepless and distressed, upset by her dream. She prays to Juno

Alcyone: He wears a circlet of the sea
Dark grains of sand for treasure store,
A cloak of seaweed gracefully
Around the orbits that no longer see.

That is my dream: the dream in me
That is my dream: the dream I see...

Juno, Juno
Do you know?
Do you know?
Juno, Juno?

[repeat]

Scene 3. Mount Olympus. Juno and Iris.

Juno: Another wife in mourning, Iris! Quickly, come to me
Perhaps a brief surprise is what will damp her misery...
A dripping corpse at night might quell in her this vanity,
It only warps the mind of man and brings insanity.

Another woman.....

Yes, Iris, in the twinkling of an eye!

Scene 4. Iris in the Cave of Somnus, God of Sleep. [Giant cavern populated with figures of dreams. Iris arrives high up over the God and his sleeping sons (dreams). She attempts to waken them but finds her efforts are in vain.] A collage of sounds (perhaps sampled) from musicals to pop music even (Beatles, the Who), or electronic, playing in and around Iris, who perhaps sings a comic collage herself, eg:

Iris: Jeepers, creepers,
 What a load of sleepers
 Jeepers, creepers,
 Activate those peepers.

 Climb every...
 When I wake up early...

 O that's no good (stamps foot).
 Sleepers, awaken!

In frustration at not being able to gain anyone's attention, Iris performs a little tap dance. Still no reaction.

 Can you hear me? See me? Touch me?

Iris takes her wand, flies down and prods the god. No reaction. A shaft of morning light comes from the entrance on high. Iris is able to let it refract from her wand onto a rainbow and shoots colours all around the cave, whipping up the dreams into a frenzy of dancing. Somnus wakes as if having a bad dream.

Somnus: Stop! Stop!

Iris: Awake, awake!

Somnus: I have the colours of my dreams.

Iris: I have the rainbow in my beams.

Somnus: So it seems.

Iris: Better than dreams
 This is my light.

Somnus: Better than light
 There are my dreams.

Shapes come to life as Somnus's sons perform a dance of dreams and nightmares. Somnus settles down again, after pleasant dreams cluster round him. Iris pushes some nightmares to wake him up.

Iris whispers Juno's commission. Somnus picks out Morpheus who is transformed into (or revealed as) the figure of Ceyx. He dances and prepares to go off on his mission.

Scene 4: Trachis. In her chamber, Alcyone laments. (Reprise of earlier songs). Then Morpheus/Ceyx appears.

Alcyone: Ceyx
My hand shakes
I see you found
Ceyx
My heart aches
To feel you drowned
Ceyx
My heart breaks
To see you found

Ceyx: Drowned.

Alcyone: What is that sound?

Ceyx: Drowned.

Alcyone: What is that sound?

Ceyx: I hear the sea call to me constantly...
Alcyone: You hear the sea call to you constantly?
Ceyx: Sand in my eyes, my staring eyes...
Alcyone: Sand in your eyes, your staring eyes?
Ceyx: I see a fish swim near me, how it gawps...
Alcyone: You see a fish swim near and how it gawps?
Ceyx: Seaweed and sponges deck my drifting corpse...
Alcyone: Seaweed and sponges deck your drifting corpse?

Ceyx:

The bubbles from the current are my sceptre
Seaweed my robes of state
I have for kingdom one small grain of sand
But there is nothing left at my command...

Alcyone realizes this figure is not Ceyx but a messenger. She rises and goes in grief to the sea shore to look for his body.

Scene 5: Seashore. Alcyone wandering, grief stricken. She finds the body clinging to a spar. The gods take pity on her and the two fly off as birds. Peleus returns and is on the beach in time to see the transformation.



Art work by **Carolyn Trant** whose work appears on the front and back covers, and inside the pages of The Poetry & Opera issue of Agenda, Vol 47 Nos 3-4.