

# H.D. AND RUMMEL'S SONGS FOR CHILDREN: A LYRICAL COLLABORATION

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Little has been written about H.D. and music, though the musicality of her verse has often been mentioned in passing. With the exception of Jeanne Kerblat-Houghton's phonological study of *Helen in Egypt*,<sup>1</sup> most comments on H.D.'s musicality have been occasional analogies to music—leitmotif, cadence, musical "gift"—the same analogies H.D. and the other Imagists were fond of making. Given the twin risks of banality and absurdity that menace any excursion into musico-literary comparison, perhaps it is just as well to be wary,<sup>2</sup> and yet the terrain looks promising and the path beckons. When we stop to consider the relation of music to elements of H.D.'s style and mode of composition, something more seems to be at work than Pound's advice that the poet compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, or more than Pater's commonplace that all art aspires to the condition of music. But any enquiry into that "something more," that supplement, would soon lead to a discussion of writing and orality and the nature of improvisation, matters that must be deferred in this short paper. Suffice it to say that music plays an important part in the H.D. mythos, and her frequent allusions to it stand as reminders of the lyric presence in her writing.

Coming from a Moravian background with a strong musical tradition, H.D. draws on this heritage as a source of family pride and reads into it the promise of artistic inspiration.<sup>3</sup> But as well as serving as a link to her forebears, music also performs a more particular contextual function in her writing. In her prose, music becomes an explicit or implicit metaphor, signalling changes in relationships or directing the reader's sympathy. On the one hand, it can point to a rupture, as in the autobiographical novel *Hermione*, where both the main character's reaction to the piano-playing of the "uninspired" and "common" Miss Stamberg, and Hermione's discomfort with the poor timing of her fiancé (whose own mother confides "hasn't a scrap of real music in him"), combine to prepare the reader for a break in the engage-

ment (*H* 108-109). On the other hand, music can indicate a reconciliation, as in the resolution of *Tribute to Freud* with its complex associations mediated through Goethe's lied, "Kennst du das Land." The conciliatory gesture of the German song would not have been lost on a contemporary reader when the memoir was first published between 1944 and 1946. For H.D., music is a language beyond words that carries with it vestiges of primitive rituals and spiritual power, no matter how debased or rarified the circumstances. The idea of the power of music to create community reappears at various points in her writing, whether in the unison singing of the soldiers at the cinema in *Bid Me To Live* (123), in the provincial recital in *Hermione* (135-39), or in the figures of Paderewski or Van Cliburn, whose playing can bring together a group of initiates and can even reconcile nations (*ET* 50).<sup>4</sup>

As a language beyond words, music has a curious duality: it both excludes those outside the cultural community, and crosses cultural borders. This is due to its emotive power and to its tendency to bond with other cultural sign-systems. Even at its most intimate, music appears at the intersection of the personal and public spheres. In H.D.'s writing music occupies just such an ambiguous cultural space. For an educated young woman of the middle-class in turn-of-the-century Philadelphia, as elsewhere, musical literacy was considered a cultural attainment, a social grace, hence the importance of mastery of the piano, or the lack of it, in *Hermione*. Bearing in mind the social significance of music in H.D.'s milieu, we could expect music to be implicated in her work as a mark of social standing. Moreover, it would be surprising not to find some trace of music in her early writing. In fact, such an early trace does turn up in her collaboration with Walter Morse Rummel on five children's songs. Written before any of her published poetry, these songs not only give us a notion of what her early "lost" poetry may have been like, but also reflect light on the question of the beginnings of Imagism.

In the spring of 1912 when H.D. was still finding her feet in London, she made a trip to Paris and called on the pianist Rummel, one of her connections from Philadelphia. She had already renewed her acquaintance with Rummel at his studio the previous year when she and Frances Gregg had visited him and he had played "wonderfully" for them, but H.D.'s songs date from her second visit.<sup>5</sup> According to Richard Aldington (also in Paris during 1912), both he and H.D. had written children's verse "at Rummel's request" which he then set to music.<sup>6</sup> This sequence of composition is the more difficult way of going about it, demanding a sensitivity for lyrics from the composer and a good understanding of rhythm from the lyricist. But Rummel was quite a proficient composer and arranger and by 1914 he had already

published several settings for chansons, including Ezra Pound's translations from the troubadours and his rather unlikely poem, "The Return."<sup>7</sup> The songs by H.D. and Aldington were published in *Ten Songs for Children Young and Old* (1914). The collection includes "Bed Time" by E. H. T. and "Slumber Song" (a traditional French song with an English translation by Claude Aveling which Donald Gallup once attributed to Ezra Pound).<sup>8</sup> The rest of the collection is made up of five songs by H.D., "The Mill Fairy," "The Flower Fairy," "The Singer Fairy," "The Cricket," and "Leaves"; and three by Aldington, "Mister Rain," "The Seven Swan Ladies," and "Sir Lancelot."

As a collection, the songs are fairly simple arrangements for piano and voice, probably intended for children learning the piano or for family entertainment with mother or an older sibling accompanying the younger ones. The majority of the songs are set in common time and in moderate tempi and one even has a simplified accompaniment. Rummel has also liberally annotated them with expressions to facilitate interpretation. As befits the subject matter of the songs, the tunes are straightforward melodies and for the most part follow the syllabic pattern of the lyrics. If Rummel composed the tunes, as seems most likely, he has quite successfully matched them to the mood and theme of each piece.

As for the lyrics themselves, they range from the mock-heroics of Aldington's "Lancelot" and the suggestion of the folk-song in his "Seven Swan Ladies" to Claude Aveling's nativity hymn. Of the ten, H.D.'s songs seem likely to have appealed most readily to children, as they conjure up images from the world of fairy made popular at the turn-of-the-century by children's books. It is somewhat harder to imagine children caroling, "Infant Divine, God's holy sign, in Heaven lies thy Kingdom." In contrast to Aveling's ponderous and rather ominous lullaby, H.D.'s songs employ simple diction and light, easy rhymes and weave together the curious with the familiar.

To write for children requires first and foremost the establishment of the foremost the establishment of the right tone: the song or story must be simple but cannot be condescending. The imaginary world of childhood must be as believable as that of the Greek gods and goddesses, or the Renaissance Florence evoked by Robert Browning's monologues or George Eliot's *Romola*. The way that H.D. has recreated the moods of childhood, its fantasy and its desire for imaginary playmates, suggests that she has taken more easily to the project than others. Much of the writing for children has been done by women, the marginal world of children's literature often being regarded as women's province. Perhaps for this reason H.D. did not see writing children's songs as something beneath her talent, or merely as a commercial venture.<sup>9</sup>

But for whatever reason, H.D. has entered into the spirit of the task and reinvoked the world of childhood with its engrossing games and curiosity. The sense that there is an other world untouched by the rational where the natural and supernatural intermingle is in keeping with H.D.'s overall fascination with the mystery in simple objects. Just as she celebrates a landscape of petals, grains of sand, and broken seed pods in *Sea Garden*, here too she creates a miniature world of grains of wheat, rose petals, and leaves animated by the wind. The characters that inhabit that world—the fairies of the mill and flowers, the crickets and mice—are those met in nursery rhymes or the stories of Beatrix Potter, and part of the charm of her songs lies in their resonance with a child's naive wonder.

One of the songs that opens up this miniature world is “The Singer Fairy,” an invitation to see and hear the momentous in insignificant things found in forgotten corners. This song also provides a good illustration of the intertextual relations that arise from H.D. and Rummel's collaboration. The lyrics and music complement each other, with the piano elaborating, reinforcing, and commenting upon the lyrics which, through their melody, come to embody the Fairy's song. Thus Rummel interprets the song, and he has given it the basic structure of two verses separated by a brief instrumental solo. The overture imitates the strumming of the harp through a set of modulations played *arpeggiando*, literally, chords played as on the *arpa*, or harp:

**Boldly**

The sing - er fai - ry raised his harp, His hands were swift, his  
 Le beau chan.teur a pris son luth, son air est fier, ses

8

This leads into the lyric's description of the harp which Rummel follows with a lighter pattern on the bass, culminating in a melodic cadence which returns the verse to the tonic chord. The solo, with its changed time signature and ornamental ascending and descending runs, could be interpreted as an echoic effect, imitating the harp's improvisation, as could the *arpeggio* phrases in the second verse. After the transition the correspondence between music and lyrics can be clearly seen in the expression marks:

the *crescendo* on the *staccato* when the harp is being tuned, the drop to *piano* when the spider webs are introduced and again the build up to the *forte* which underscores the “thunder of the dew drops fall.” Rummel’s interpretation of “The Singer Fairy” underpins a regular 6/8 rhythm with carefully nuanced chords, thus providing a varied but unobtrusive accompaniment to H.D.’s simple tetrameter and delicate narrative.

Of the other H.D. songs in the selection, two more are fairy songs, one is a round depicting a child whirling with the autumn leaves, and the last, a child listening for a cricket. These last two share a sense of children playing in the open air and projecting their own moods upon their surroundings. Something of this spirit in a more serious fashion animates H.D.’s “Oread” and “The Pool,” poems of affective transference and metamorphosis that yet retain a certain playfulness. In the children’s songs this animating impulse could be explained as personification, but a rhetorical explanation hardly suits the evocation of the child’s state of mind where leaves dance and play or crickets call out like friends at a game of hide-and-seek. Once again Rummel responds to the meaning and mood of the lyrics in his melodies and use of expression. “The Leaves” is annotated “*staccatissimo et marcatissimo*,” “*espressivo*” and “*in allargando, giocoso*,” while “The Cricket” is to be played “Delicately, appealingly.” In “The Cricket” Rummel takes this form of correspondence between lyric and music to its logical conclusion: the illustrative medium of program music.

The music in “The Cricket” is completely subordinate to the lyrics, as the whole piece describes the scene. The background, played by the right hand in the treble, is marked “monotonously, very even” and the left hand, again in the treble, “*staccato*” and “*espressivo*” to illustrate the sound of a single cricket. The impression of a summer evening, with the crickets singing both nearer and further away, Rummel renders with a set of vibrato triplets hovering between high C and a semi-tone down for the duration of the piece, and punctuated by the *staccato* attack on the left hand to mimic the nearer cricket’s voice:

The image shows a musical score for the song "The Cricket". It consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with the following lyrics: "heard a lit - tle voice that cried:" above the notes and "iends dans l'herbe un fai - ble cri:" below. The middle staff is the right hand of a piano accompaniment in treble clef, featuring a continuous, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The bottom staff is the left hand of a piano accompaniment in treble clef, featuring a sparse, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The entire score is set against a light green background.





The evenness of the vocal part suggests the recitative of a child singing to herself, absorbed in an imaginary monologue. This leads up to the child's imitation of the cricket, which Rummel expresses by a special kind of grace note known as *acciaccatura*, the initial note raised one half-step and lasting no measurable time at all. This creates an onomatopoeia, the clicking of the tongue against the palate reproducing the cricket's chirp. Thus, the sound quality of the word only emerges in performance, a characteristic of H.D.'s poetry remarked by Eric White and John Cournots in other contexts.<sup>10</sup> That H.D. should have chosen the sound "cri" to represent the cricket in this song is doubly apt, as "le cri-cri" is the French name for the insect, and therefore the translation of the song's title.

This play between French and English brings up another interesting aspect of the *Songs*: the texts are bilingual. Whether the French versions were written to increase the market for the songs (published in London, Paris, and Boston), or to add to them the further purpose of teaching an English-speaking child some rudimentary French, the French versions reflect the cosmopolitan inclinations of H.D. and the others involved in the project. The French versions also help to establish something of the circumstances of composition. With the exception of "Slumber Song," they appear to be "adaptations françaises par Thérèse Chaigneau," though this is left a little vague, since only the first song is so marked. In her autobiographical notes H.D. mentions visiting Thérèse Chaigneau in 1912 and this may point to a further element of collaboration, though H.D. and Aldington could have done the French themselves.<sup>11</sup> In any case, the French adaptations could not have been written before the music, and this fact develops the levels of textuality: the English lyrics interpret the voice of childhood, the music interprets the lyrics, both of which are, in turn, interpreted by the French versions.

Two years elapsed between the composition of these songs and their publication

in *Ten Songs for Children*, and the interval brought H.D. and Aldington's marriage, Imagism, and the avalanche of the first World War. These children's songs belong to a time before all that, a time of drawing room teas in London and Paris with sheet music and poetry scattered around the piano. The metrical smoothness of these songs provides a marked contrast to the *vers libre* with which the initials H.D. were to become associated after her debut in *Poetry*, but even in this early verse her tendency towards an open syntax and strophic form can be discerned. Though the songs may add little to our understanding of the historical moment of Imagism or to H.D.'s reputation as one of the preeminent American modernists, they do help to correct the idealist view of the inspired artist working in isolation and show instead H.D. working with others as a writer intent upon her craft and fortunate in her companions.

#### NOTES

1. Jeanne Kerblat-Houghton, "Helen in Egypt: Variations sur un thème sonore," *G.R.E.S.* 2 (1978).
2. For a discussion of the limitations of the comparative method of musico-literary criticism see the introduction to *Melopoiesis* (New York: New York UP, 1988) by Jean-Pierre Barricelli.
3. *The Gift* and *Tribute to Freud* in particular refer to this musical inheritance, and their associational prose is structured in such non-linear ways as to invite comparison with music.
4. In *End to Torment* H.D. makes clear that an article on Van Cliburn from *Time* is the immediate stimulus for her memory of Paderewski, but, given the political context of her Pound memoir, she may have also had in mind Paderewski's brief role as Prime Minister for Poland in 1919.
5. H. D., "Autobiographical Notes." For permission to consult and refer to these papers I would again like to thank Perdita Schaffner and those connected with the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book Room and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
6. My thanks to Norman T. Gates for calling to my attention the reference to Rummel in Aldington's *Life for Life's Sake* (1941) in *HDN* 2.2 (Winter 1988): 54-55.

7. Found in "Songs of Ezra Pound for a voice with instrumental accompaniment" (London: Augener, 1911) 13.
8. Gallup retracts this claim in his later bibliography of Ezra Pound (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983) 139.
9. H.D. also wrote a few poems about childhood, published as "Three Child Songs," in *Transition* 4 (1927), and the children's story, *The Hedgehog* (London: Brendin, 1936).
10. Eric White's *Images of H.D.* (London: Enitharmon, 1976) and John Cournos' *Miranda Masters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926) both give accounts of H.D.'s mesmerizing improvisations.
11. This seems quite likely, but the point remains that the French versions are quite different from the English ones.