

Song Acts

Twelve Songs to Texts from Ezra Pound

For Mezzo Soprano, Baritone, and Piano

Book I: Angels of Wind and Fire

2008, 2018

Lawrence Kramer

Song Acts is a hybrid work, half a choreographed song cycle and half a musical drama enacted in twelve songs. The “libretto” is drawn from the early poetry of Ezra Pound; the work seeks to compress the impassioned action typical of opera into a series of simple movements and gestures without an explicit narrative, much as the poems seek to compress historical experience into a sequence of free-floating images.

Writing in the early twentieth century, Pound took up the traditional topics of love and war to articulate and also to counter the feeling, widespread at the time, that modernity had caused experience to lose its depth and become merely a series of shocks and impressions. As Walter Benjamin famously expressed it, life felt as if human beings had fallen off the calendar. The result on one hand was a loss of the sense of the numinous that once touched everyday life and, on the other, the collective folly that allowed the catastrophe of the First World War. These issues are with us again, in new and perhaps more dangerous forms than in their first iteration, so it seemed more than timely to view the early years of the present century through the prism of their counterparts in the last.

The work resists synopsis because keeping narrative at a remove is one of its aims; the idea is to preserve the narrative dimension without telling a particular story. But the basic action involves the vicissitudes of meeting and parting, separation and reunion, intimacy and distance between romantic partners. The fate of the couple, however, becomes significant not only (or not primarily) in its own right but as an embodiment of the possibility of authentic human bonds in an era that is at best indifferent to them and at worst brutally hostile.

Song Acts consists of two books, which may be performed either as independent cycles or in sequence to form the full cycle. Book I, *Angels of Wind and Fire* (six songs, eighteen minutes) turns on the vicissitudes of desire, separation, and reunion. Book II, *Erat Hora* (six songs, twenty-one minutes) dwells on the question of how, in the words of W. H. Auden, to “show an affirming flame” amid dark memories and darker events. The title songs may also be performed independently.

All the texts are in the public domain. Some have been freely modified.

1. "The dew is upon the leaf. The night about us is restless."

2. Alba

As cool as the pale wet leaves of lily-of-the-valley
She / He lay beside me in the dawn.

3. Among the Cliffs

Whither he went I may not follow him. His eyes
Were strange to-day. They always were,
After their fashion, kindred of the sea. . .

Whither he went I may not come, they say,
He is become estranged from all the rest. . .

Well! I have come today:

Oimé! Oimé!

I wonder why the wind, even the wind doth seem
To mock me now, all night, all night,
And I have strayed among the cliffs here.
Someday, they say, I'll fall,
Down through the sea-bit fissures, and no more
Know the warm cloak of sun, or bathe
The dew across my tired eyes to comfort them.
They try to keep me hid within four walls.
I will not stay!

And let the wind say: "Oimé!"

4. "The night about us is restless. The dew is upon the leaf."

5. Separation on the River Kiang.

Ko-jin goes west from Ko-kaku-ro,
The smoke-flowers are blurred over the river.
The lone sail blots the far sky.
And now I see only the river,
The long Kiang, reaching heaven.

6. Angels of Wind and Fire.

The angel of prayer according to the Talmud stands unmoved among the angels of wind and fire, who die as their one song is finished, also as he gathers the prayers they turn to flowers in his hands.

And if I, watching. . .
Make of these prayers of earth ever new flowers,
Marvel and wonder!
Marvel and wonder even as I,
Giving to prayer new language
And causing the works to speak
Of the earth-horde's age-lasting longing,
Even as I marvel and wonder, and know not,
Yet keep my watch in the ash wood
Among angels of wind and fire.

No. 1 is a line from Pound's "Coitus"; no. 4 reverses its clauses. No. 3 is an extract that takes great liberties with the meaning of the original, "Idyl [sic] for Glaucus." No. 6 is a slightly modified version of the epigraph and concluding lines of "Sandalphon."

Couplet I

♩ = 84

From a distance in the rear, but visible. *p*

Soprano

Stage center. Head down until singing begins.

The dew _____

Baritone

The dew _____

Piano

p

5

mf

is u - pon _____

mp *mf*

9

u - pon the leaf.

mf

is u - pon the leaf.

14

mp *p* *pp*

p *p*

The dew is u - pon the

ff *mf* *p*

20

mp *mf*

leaf, the night a - bout

mp *mf*

mf

ah

f

us is rest

29

p

p

mf *p*

less, rest less,

34

mf

Begin to come forward little by little.

mp

p

ah, ah, ah, ah,

Begin to recede, little by little.

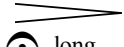
mp

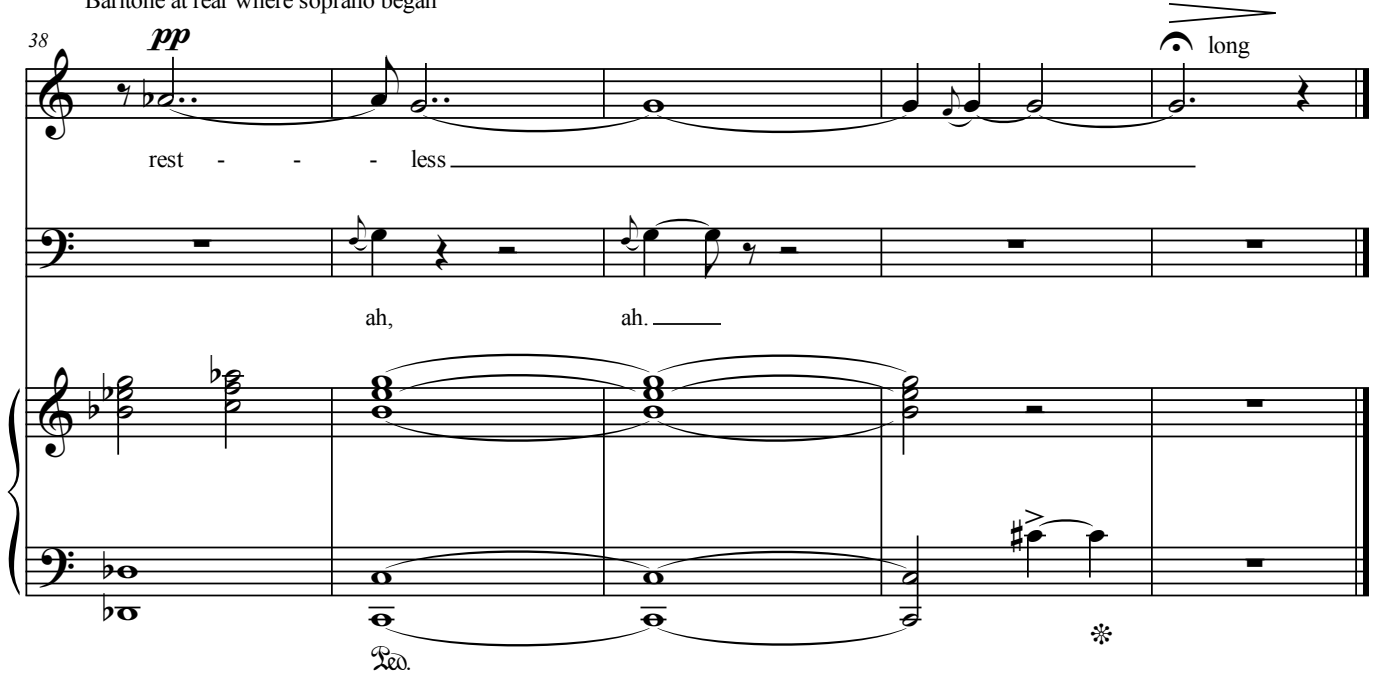
pp

rest - - - less, rest - less,

Couplet

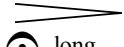
Soprano now at stage center.
Baritone at rear where soprano began

38 *pp*  long



rest - - - less _____

ah, ah. _____

pp  long

Ped. *

Alba

♩ = 80

The singers, four or five paces apart, steadily face the audience. They do not look at each other.

As — cool — as the pale wet

As cool as the pale wet

pp

Detailed description: This system contains the first four measures of the piece. It features a vocal line in treble clef and a bass line in bass clef, both in 5/4 time. The piano accompaniment is in 5/4 time, starting with a *pp* dynamic. The lyrics 'As — cool — as the pale wet' are written under the vocal line, with a long horizontal line under 'cool' indicating a sustained note. The piano part consists of chords and moving lines in both hands.

6 leaves, — the pale wet

6 leaves, — the pale wet

p *p*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 5 through 8. The vocal line continues with the lyrics 'leaves, — the pale wet', with a long horizontal line under 'leaves,'. The piano accompaniment continues with chords and moving lines. Dynamics include *p* and *p* with a crescendo hairpin. A measure number '6' is written at the beginning of the system.

11

leaves, the pale wet leaves _____

leaves, the pale wet leaves _____ of li - ly of the

11

11

16

of li - ly of the val - ley _____

val - ley _____ of li - ly of the

16

p *p* *pp* *p*

16

21

of li - ly of the val - ley _____

val - ley _____

21

p *pp* *p*

21

25 Turns slightly toward baritone.

He lay be - side me, lay be - side

She lay be - side me, lay be - side

Turns slightly toward soprano.

mf *f* *p* *pp* *p* *pp*

The singers turn further
toward each other and
make eye contact.

31

me in the dawn.

me in the dawn.

Among the Cliffs

♩ = 76

Positioned a little off-center,
on far side relative to baritone.

p

Whi-ther he went I may _____ not

Positioned at a distance,
diagonally behind soprano.

p *pp* l.h.

Detailed description: This system contains the first five measures of the piece. It features a vocal line in 3/4 time with lyrics, a piano accompaniment, and a baritone line. The piano part includes dynamics *p* and *pp*, and a first-hand (l.h.) marking. The vocal line has a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure and a long note with a line through it in the fifth measure. The baritone line is mostly silent.

fol - - - low him. _____ His eyes were strange ___ to-

p

Detailed description: This system contains measures 6 through 10. The vocal line continues with lyrics and a long note with a line through it. The piano accompaniment features a melodic line in the right hand and a more active line in the left hand with triplets. Dynamics include *p*. Measure numbers 7 and 7 are indicated at the start of the vocal and piano staves respectively.

12

day.

12 Coming halfway toward soprano. *p* A few steps closer. 3 Continues approaching.

They al - ways were, af - ter their fash - ion,

12

l.h.

16 *rit.* ♩ = 66 Quarter turn toward baritone. Looks at him.

Ends a few paces from soprano, his profile to the audience, eyes on her.

16 *rit.*

af - ter their fash - ion kind - red of the sea.

16 *rit.*

mp espress.

8vb - - 1

♩ = 76 *rit.*

21

Whi-ther he went I may not come, they say.

p

r.h.

♩ = 66 *Halts. accel.*

25

He, he is be - come es - tranged from all the rest.

mp espress.

p

8vb

♩ = 76 *Moves to center front.*

29

Well! I have come to - day.

8va

♩ = 88

33 *accel.* *f* *mf*

Oi - mé!

33 *accel.* *f*

37 *mf* *mf*

Oi - mé Oi - mé!

Moves closer to soprano; singers are now only a few paces apart. *f* Facing the audience.

37 *f*

Oi - mé Oi - mé!

40

40

I won-der — why the wind, — e-ven the wind — doth seem to mock me now, —

40

44 *mf* \leftarrow *f* \rightarrow *mp* Turns head away from baritone, half-profile to audience.

ah ah

44 all night, all night, and I have

48

48 strayed a - mong the cliffs here.

48

51

51 Some day, _____ they say I'll fall, _____

51

55

55

fall down through the sea-bit fishes,

55

59 Half turn. Looks at baritone. *pp* *p* Turns back; faces audience. *mp*

59

ah! no more know...

59

and no more, no more know

59

p *mp*

63

63

the warm cloak of sun, or

63

f

63

67

bathe the dew a - cross my tir - - - ed

69

steps forward *p*

Some day they say

eyes _____ to com - fort them. _____

bows head

pp

69

73

I'll fall _____ and no more know _____ the warm cloak _____ of

p

mf

73

rit.

73

rit.

pp

p

f

a tempo

78

sun, _____

78 raises head ***ff***

They try to keep me hid _____ with -

mf \longleftarrow ***f*** ***ff***

81

Steps forward, aligning with the soprano.

81 in four walls. _____ I will not stay! _____

81

8vb *8vb*

ff

84 I will not stay! _____

84 I will not stay! _____

84

8vb *8vb*

86

I will not stay!

86

8^{va}

88

Steps toward baritone, closing gap.

88

88

90

Side by side.

I will not stay!

90

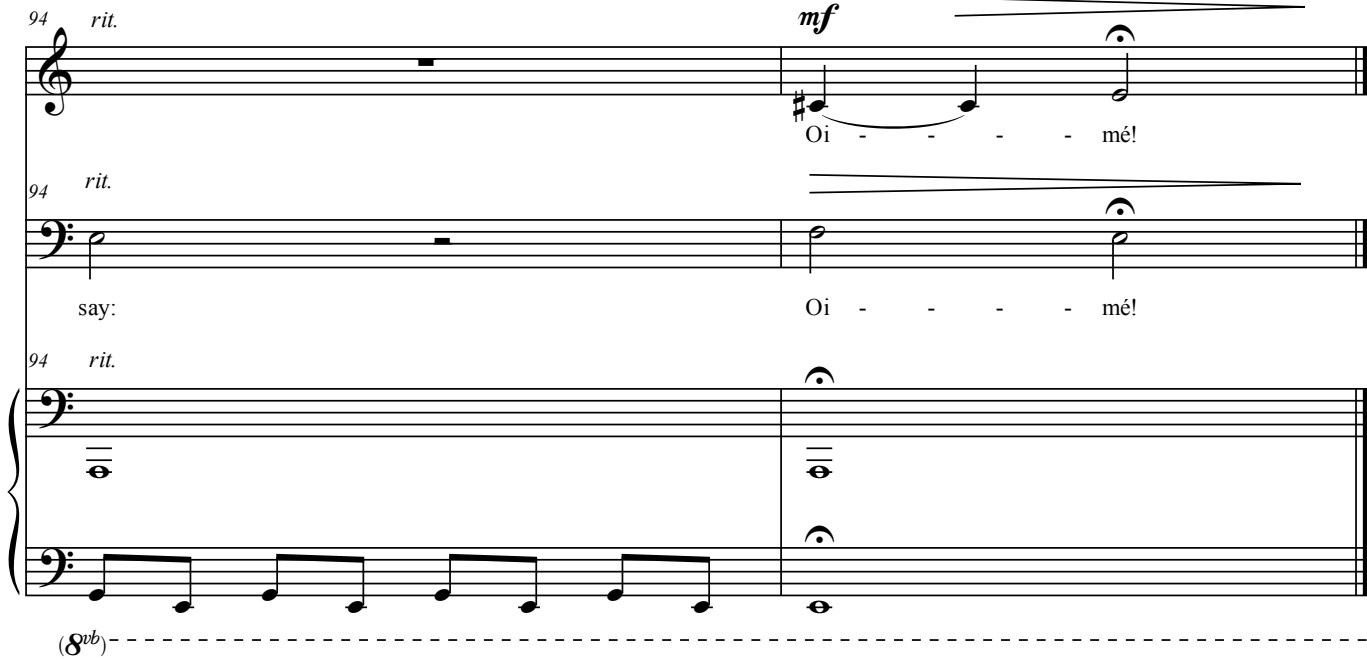
I will not stay! And let — the wind —

90

ff

8^{va}

94 *rit.* *mf*



94 *rit.*

say: Oi - - - - - mé!

94 *rit.*

(8vb)

Couplet II

♩ = 48

Standing in front of baritone.

pp

Ah

pp

The night — a - bout us, — the night — a -

Piano

pp

Detailed description: This system contains measures 1 through 5. The vocal line (soprano and bass) begins with a rest, followed by the vocalization 'Ah'. The piano accompaniment features a series of chords in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand. The dynamic is *pp*.

6

Ah

6

bout us is rest - - - less.

6

p

Detailed description: This system contains measures 6 through 9. The vocal line continues with 'Ah' and then the lyrics 'bout us is rest - - - less.'. The piano accompaniment includes triplets in the right hand and sustained chords in the left hand. The dynamic changes to *p* in measure 9.

10

10

The dew is u -

10

Detailed description: This system contains measures 10 through 13. The vocal line begins with a rest, followed by the lyrics 'The dew is u -'. The piano accompaniment features a complex melodic line with triplets in the right hand and sustained chords in the left hand.

Slowly stepping back, joining baritone.

12

pon the leaf,

15 Receding to the distance.

15

ah up - on the leaf.

8va *loco*

18

cresc *8va*

Separation on the River Kiang

♩ = 88

From distant position reached at the end of Couplet II.

♩ = 108

p

Ped. * Ped. * Ped. # Ped.

6 *rit.* *a tempo*

Ko - jin goes west, Ko - jin goes west

Ko - jin goes west, Ko - jin goes west

6 *rit.* *a tempo* 8

* Ped. * Ped. * Ped.

Pedaling of mm, 3-8 applies to all similar passages.

2
10 *rit.* ♩ = 88 *rit.*

from Ko - ka-ku-ro, Ko - ka-ku-ro,

10 *rit.* 12 *rit.*

15 *a tempo*

the smoke flow - ers are blurred o - ver the

15 *a tempo* *espress.*

19 ♩ = 116 *rit.*

ri - ver, o - ver the ri - ver.

19 *rit.* 22

23 $\text{♩} = 88$ Begins moving slowly, crosswise.

The lone sail blots the

espress.

27

far sky.

The lone sail blots

30 $\text{♩} = 108$

the far sky.

4

34

rit.

♩ = 88

Stops. From furthest visible distance:

And now I see on - ly the

And now I see on - ly the

espress.

40

accel.

♩ = 108

ri - - - ver, on - ly the

ri - - - ver, on - ly the

accel.

46

rit.

ri - - - ver, the

ri - - - ver, the

rit.

51 $\text{♩} = 76$

ri - ver, the long Ki - ang, the

ri - ver, the - long Ki - ang, the -

51

pp

56 *rit.*

long Ki ang, - reach - ing hea - ven.

long ki - ang, - reach - ing - ven.

56

rit.

pva

pva

Angels of Wind and Fire

♩ = 116

Begins moving toward baritone.

fp *fp* *pp*

Led.

7 Stops next to baritone, slightly behind him.

Steps forward, slightly ahead. Speaking:

Speaking:

Also, as he gathers the prayers they turn to flowers in his hands.

7 The angel of prayer according to the Talmud stands unmoved among the angels of wind and fire, who die as their one song is finished.

Hold until sound fades away.

pp

Led.

*

2
11

Now side by side.

And if I, watch-ing, make of these prayers of earth _____

And if I, watch-ing, make _____ of these

* *Leg.*

18

e - ver new flow - ers, _____ Mar - vel and

prayers of earth e - ver new _____ flow - ers, _____

* *Leg.*

24

$\text{♩} = 100$

won - der! _____

Mar - vel and won - der! _____

* *Leg.* *

Turns to baritone.

31

Turns to mezzo.

Mar - vel and won - - - der,

Mar - vel and won - - - der Mar - vel and

Mar - vel and won - - - der Mar - vel and

31

p

Led. * *Led.* * *Led.*

Turns to audience.

37

Mar - vel and won - - - der, e - ven as

won - - - der e - ven as

37

p

* *Led.* * *Led.* * *Led.* *

$\text{♩} = 116$

43

I, giv - ing to prayer new language and

Turns to audience.

I, And caus - ing the works to speak,

43

mp

Led.

4
49

caus - ing the works to speak, and

giv - ing to prayer new lan - guage

mf

* *Leg.* * *Leg.*

55

caus - ing the works to speak

and caus - ing the works to speak

* *Leg.*

62

♩ = 100

Moves away a little; irregular steps.

of the earth

of the earth

* *Leg.* * *Leg.* *

68

horde's age last - ing long - - - ing.

horde's ³ age last - ing long - - - ing.

mf

ped. * * * * *

68

mf

ped. * * * * *

Returns.

73

E-ven as I Mar - vel and won -

E-ven as I Mar - vel and

mf

ped. * * * * *

73

f

ped.

79

der! And know not, but keep my

won - der! And know not, but keep my

79

ff

ped. * * *

watch in the ash wood _____ a - mong an - gels of

watch in the ash wood _____ a - among an - gels of

8va-1

*

Leg.

p *cresc.* *tr* *ff*

wind and fire. _____

wind and fire. _____

p *cresc.* *tr* *ff*

♩ = 100

*

Leg.

rit. *a tempo* *molto rit.*

rit. *a tempo* *molto rit.* *long*

8va-

pp *long*

* *Leg.* *