

Song Acts

Twelve Songs to Texts from Ezra Pound

For Mezzo Soprano, Baritone, and Piano

Book I: Angels of Wind and Fire

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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 but 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 put it, life felt as if human beings had fallen off the calendar. The result on the one hand was a loss of the sense of the numinous that had 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 still, in new and perhaps even more dangerous forms, so these old modernist poems remain all too timely.

“Songs Acts” resists synopsis because of its prismatic approach to narrative. 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 less in its own right than 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, seventeen 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. The pronouns “he” and “she” may be switched freely throughout.

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. Song of Separation

Blue mountains to the north of the walls,
White river winding about them;
Here we must make separation
And go out through a thousand miles of dead grass.

Mind like a floating wide cloud.
Sunset like the parting of old acquaintances
Who bow over their clasped hands at a distance.
Our horses neigh to each other
as we are departing.

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. 6 is a slightly modified version of the epigraph and conclusion 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

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

mp

p

pp

ah, ah, ah, ah,

Begin to come forward little by little.

Begin to recede, little by little.

mp

pp

rest - - - less, rest - less,

Couplet

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

5

Baritone at rear where Soprano began

38 *pp*

rest - - - less _____

ah, ah. ____

Red.

* long

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

This system contains the first five measures of the piece. It features a vocal melody in the treble clef, a bass line in the bass clef, and a piano accompaniment in grand staff. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 80. The lyrics 'As — cool — as the pale wet' are written under the vocal line. The piano part begins with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic.

leaves, — the pale wet

leaves, — the pale wet

p *p*

This system contains measures 6 through 10. The vocal lines continue with the lyrics 'leaves, — the pale wet'. The piano accompaniment features a series of chords in the right hand and a more active bass line. Dynamics *p* (piano) are indicated in measures 9 and 10.

16

21

21

of li - ly of the val - ley _____

val - ley _____

21

p *pp* *p*

25 Turns slightly toward baritone.

He lay be - side me, lay be - side

She lay be - side me, lay be - side

mf f p pp p pp

Turns slightly toward soprano.

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

31

me in the dawn.

me in the dawn.

mf f p pp p pp

Song of Departure II

♩ = 88

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Side by side with baritone.

p

Blue moun - tains

Depress keys silently *ff*

Catch sound with pedal.

7

Drifts away from baritone. Pauses.

Blue moun - tains

to the north of the walls, —

7 As before.

ff

p

Ped.

12

to the north of the walls, _____ Drifts a few steps further.

White ri - ver _____ wind - ing,

12

f *p* 14

8va

16

Stops.

White ri - ver wind-ing a bout them, _____

wind - ing a - bout them, _____ wind - ing a -

16

f *p* *f*

20

bout them. _____

20 21

p *f* *p*

*

24

Here we must make _____ se - pa -

Here we must make _____ se - pa - ra - tion.

24

cresc. *f* *p* *cresc.*

o

28

ra - - - tion, _____

Here _____ we must make _____ se - pa -

28

f

Leo.

v v v * 6

32

and go out _____ and go out

ra - - - tion,

32

36

and go out _____ through a thou - sand miles _____ of ____ dead

36

p

v v v

40 *a tempo*

through a thou - sand miles _____ of dead grass.

grass.

8va

40

pp

Ped.

44

Mind _____ like a

44

p *cresc.*

47

Sun - set, _____

float - ing wide _____ cloud, Sun - set _____ like the part - ing of

47

p *mp* *f p*

And.

51

Sun - set, old a -

old a - quaint-an - ces, old ac - quaint - an - ces who

51

54

$\text{♩} = 100$

quaint-an - ces who bow o - ver their clasped hands,

bow o - ver their clasped hands,

54

58

clasp ed hands, clasp ed

bow o - ver - their clasp ed hands, their clasp ed

58

ff *pp*

8^{va} Ped.

63

hands at a dis - tance.

hands at a dis - tance.

63

p

8^{va} Ped.

67

Our hor - ses neigh at each o - ther

f *p*

Led. * # Led. * Led. * # Led.

72

as we,

f *p*

Led. * Led. *

74



74

Piano accompaniment for measures 74-78. The right hand plays a series of half notes: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4. The left hand plays a series of half notes: G3, A3, Bb3, C4, Bb3, A3, G3. The dynamic marking *p* is present. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a repeat sign. The word "Led." is written below the left hand staff, and a flower-like symbol is placed at the end of the piece.

79



79

Piano accompaniment for measures 79-83. The right hand plays a series of half notes: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4. The left hand plays a series of half notes: G3, A3, Bb3, C4, Bb3, A3, G3. The dynamic marking *p* is present. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a repeat sign. The word "Led." is written below the left hand staff, and a flower-like symbol is placed at the end of the piece.

Couplet II

$\text{♩} = 48$
Standing in front of baritone.

pp

Ah

pp

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

Piano

pp

6

Ah

6

bout us is rest - - - less. —

6

p

10

The dew is u -

10

10

12 Slowly stepping back, joining baritone.

pon the leaf,

15 Receding to the distance.

ah ah

8va loco up - on the leaf.

18

8va

Separation on the River Kiang

♩ = 88

From distant position reached at the end of Couplet II.

♩ = 108

The musical score is written in 4/4 time. The piano part begins with a series of chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand, marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The vocal part enters with the lyrics "Ko - jin goes west,". The tempo changes from 88 to 108 beats per minute. The score includes a repeat sign and a key signature change to B-flat major. The lyrics "Ko - jin goes west" are repeated. The tempo changes from *rit.* to *a tempo*. The piano part includes a series of chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand, marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The score includes a repeat sign and a key signature change to B-flat major. The lyrics "Ko - jin goes west" are repeated. The tempo changes from *rit.* to *a tempo*. The piano part includes a series of chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand, marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic.

p

rit. *a tempo*

Ko - jin goes west, Ko - jin goes west

Ko - jin goes west, Ko - jin goes west

rit. *a tempo*

p

rit. *a tempo*

p

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

2
10

rit. ♩ = 88 *rit.*

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

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

10 12 *rit.* *rit.*

15 *a tempo*

the smoke flow - ers are blurred o - ver the

the smoke flow - ers are blurred o - ver the

15 *a tempo*

espress.

19 ♩ = 116 *rit.*

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

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

19 22 *rit.*

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

rit.

espress.

40

accel.

♩ = 108

ri - - - ver, on - ly the

accel.

46

rit.

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-

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

56

rit.

8va

8va

Angels of Wind and Fire

♩ = 116

Begins moving toward baritone.

fp *fp* *pp*

7 Stops next to baritone, slightly behind him.

7 Speaking:

7 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

Red.

*

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

11

Leo.

*

18

p

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

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

18

p

Leo.

*

24

$\text{♩} = 100$

won - der! _____

Mar - vel and won - der! _____

24

Leo.

*

4
49

caus - ing the works to speak, and

giv - ing to prayer new lan - guage

mf

* Ped. *

55

caus - ing the works to speak

and caus - ing the works to speak

* Ped.

62

$\text{♩} = 100$ Moves away a little; irregular steps.

of the earth

of the earth

* Ped. *

68

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

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

68

Ped. mf

73

Returns. $\text{♩} = 116$

E - ven as I Mar - vel and won -

E - ven as I Mar - vel and

73

Ped.

79

der! And know not, but keep my

won - der! And know not, but keep my

79

Ped. *ff*

6
86

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

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

86

8va - 1

** Leo.*

92

p *cresc.* *tr* *ff*

wind and fire. _____

wind and fire. _____

92

ff *p*

** Leo.*

99

rit. *a tempo* *molto rit.*

99

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

8va - 1

pp *long*

** Leo.* ** Leo.* ** Leo.* ** Leo.*