Pound as music theorist: *Antheil and the* *Treatise on Harmony*

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*Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* (1924) is Pound’s most decisive attempt to position himself as a musicologist. His theory of harmony, which he calls ‘absolute rhythm’, encourages a new way of thinking about musical composition: through rhythms and frequencies instead of harmonic progression.[[1]](#endnote-1) Pound had been developing this idea for over fourteen years, since he began studying the troubadour poets. Writing about Guido Cavalcanti in 1912, Pound declared, ‘I believe in an “absolute rhythm,” a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed’ (*EPM* 469). Here, ‘absolute rhythm’ is poetic metre that precisely renders the emotion, informed by the sounds and rhythms of Cavalcanti’s verses that seemed, to Pound, to communicate something beyond the sense-meanings of words. Music was integral to Pound’s early poetics: verse should be composed ‘in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome’, as he famously declared in his 1912 Imagist principles (*LE* 3). In the *Treatise*, though,Pound’s appreciation of melodic musical phrases is absent, and instead he advocates using ‘hard bits’ of rhythm (*ATH* 46). By 1924, the theory of ‘absolute rhythm’ – which began as a way of describing and accounting for rhythmic excellence in poetry – had solidified into a conviction that musical harmony should be approached as the mathematical study of time and rhythm, rather than pitch and chords: ‘The element most grossly emitted from treatises on harmony up to the present is the element of TIME,’ he explains (*ATH* 9). There is thus a significant difference between Pound’s initial approach to music and his attempt, in the *Treatise*, to explain musical sounds ‘from the point of view of mathematics’ (*ATH* 15).

The *Treatise* is part of an intricate negotiation in Pound’s thought. He felt that music had a distinctive expressive capacity and wished to harness this in poetry. Yet what Pound felt music offered poetry was distinct from language, which made it difficult to articulate, leading him away from his own doctrines of linguistic precision, and frustrating his desire for ‘direct presentation’ outlined in the Imagist principles. Pound’s solutions to the problems posed by music are manifested in a shift towards mathematics and empirical observation in *Antheil and the* *Treatise on Harmony*, and are influenced by two French writers whose impact on this text are not widely appreciated: Théophile Gautier, and Rémy de Gourmont. Pound had in mind Théophile Gautier’s comparison between the poet and sculptor in the poem ‘L’art’ when he used the phrase ‘hard bits’ to describe the rhythmic precision of music by Antheil, and Stravinsky. Initially, ‘The Treatise on Harmony’ was published as an article in *The Transatlantic Review* in 1924, but later that year Pound added an essay on Antheil from the *Criterion* and published the *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* as a book, showing that the theory does not stand alone, but is validated by and endorses new music. Specifically, the theory of ‘absolute rhythm’ promotes the forcefully rhythmic music of Antheil over composers such as Debussy, Fauré, and Wagner, who are critiqued in the essays comprising the final, 1927 version of the book.[[2]](#endnote-2) Pound’s rejection of these composers was informed by his study of Gourmont, who disapproved of art that appealed primarily to the emotions, claiming that this bypassed faculties of judgement and discrimination. In the *Treatise*,Pound rejects what he calls the ‘atmospheric’ composers who work on the senses instead of the intellect, and uses the language of maths and science to validate his ideas about pitch and the value of specific compositions. In *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* Pound tries to manage music’s esoteric qualities, champion new artists, and modernise his aesthetics.

**The history of ‘absolute rhythm’**

Although *The* *Treatise* itself contains little information about how the ideas in it relate to poetry, Pound’s study of music was inspired by his research into historical European poetics. Pound’s early conviction that iambic pentameter should be avoided grew out of his study of Arnaut Daniel and Guido Cavalcanti, whose intricate and unusual rhythms he thought should educate the modern poet. Later, in the *Pisan Cantos*, Pound refers back to this as the genesis of his struggle to save poetry from centuries of rhythmic and ideological atrophy: ‘To break the pentameter, that was the first heave’ (*C* LXXXI/538). As Pound sought to liberate poetry from rigid metrical patterns, thinking carefully about rhythm through music provided new ways of constructing metrical verse. The phrase ‘absolute rhythm’ first appears in 1910, when Pound introduces his translations of Cavalcanti’s sonnets thus:

I believe in an ultimate and absolute rhythm as I believe in an absolute symbol or metaphor. The perception of the intellect is given in the word, that of the emotions in the cadence. It is only then, in the perfect rhythm joined to the perfect word, that the twofold vision can be recorded. (Pound 1954: 23).

A rhythm can be ‘ultimate and absolute’ because it can be perfectly suited to the word, and combine with language to create a ‘twofold vision’. For Pound, using language with the right rhythms – which, unlike repeated lines of iambic pentameter, ought to be unique to what is being described – can allow something new to be seen. In his translations, Pound is committed to recuperating his sense of Cavalcanti’s work as a totality: he explains his attempt ‘to bring over the qualities of Guido’s rhythm, not line for line, but to embody in the whole of my English some trace of that power which implies the man’ (Pound 1954: 24). The evocative capacity of rhythms and sounds become as important as the sense meanings of words. This informs Pound’s style of translation, which pays close attention to the rhythms of the original poem, reaching for its tempos, sounds, and tensions instead of attempting a word-for-word transformation.

Pound’s musically-inspired attention to sound over literal meaning challenged the concept of translation. He also used this technique to translate the Anglo-Saxon poem, ‘The Seafarer’. Often collected and anthologised, it exemplifies Pound’s rejection of established academic discourses in favour of what he called ‘“The New Method” in scholarship’ (Pound 1911: 107). First published in *The New Age* in November 1911, this was the first instalment of the twelve part essay series, ‘I Gather the Limbs of Osiris’. Part X, subtitled ‘On Music’, where he elaborates on *motz el son*: the troubadour’s art of combining words and music which shapes Pound’s approach to translating ‘The Seafarer’ (Pound 1912: 343-4). For Michael Alexander, this poem is a ‘non-starter’ if judged as a registration ‘of the dictionary meanings of the words of the original’, but Pound ‘preferred to render its sound as well as its sense’ (1981: 72, 74). From very early on in his career, then, Pound equated music with the irrational, setting it up in opposition to language and rational meaning as something that can endow poetic language with emotive and communicative capacities that go beyond the signifying functions of words. This is how Pound’s interest in music began, but he presents a very different methodology that uses the language of maths and science in the *Treatise.*

**Pound among the musicians**

From this starting point to the publication of the *Treatise* and beyond, Pound sought to establish himself as an authority on music. Arriving in London in 1908, he was already close friends with American pianist Katherine Ruth Heyman, entering the social scene, he said, ‘more or less under her wing’ (*SL* 147; Carr 2009: 34-5). He befriended pianists Walter Morse Rummel and Agnes Bedford, collaborating with both on settings of troubadour songs (Rummel 1911, 1913; Bedford 1920). Between 1917 and 1920 he wrote concert reviews for *The New Age* under the pseudonym William Atheling (*EPM* 57-241). He studied Arnold Dolmetsch’s book *The Interpretation of the Music of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries*, which became the driving force behind the *vers libre* technique(free verse), and the subject of several articles and reviews (*EPM* 35-50). Work by Helen Carr (2009) and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (2002) has uncovered the influence of Florence Farr, who worked with W. B. Yeats on the connection of words and music, and whose book *The Music of Speech* (1909)inspired Pound’s interest in Dolmetsch and the Provençal poets. Pound never acknowledges Farr’s influence, but Carr notes that ‘Farr’s insistence on the link between music and poetry undoubtedly made a considerable impact on Pound, for it was only after meeting her that he began to research seriously the musical accompaniment to Provençal poetry, and to emphasise the musicality of verse’ (Carr 2009: 179).

Disillusioned with Britain after the First World War, Pound moved to Paris in 1921, attracted by its thriving literary community, which included James Joyce, Ford Madox Ford, Gertrude Stein, and Ernest Hemingway. He met violinist Olga Rudge, who became his lifelong partner, and George Antheil, becoming enthused by the vibrancy and newness of the young American composer’s music (Conover 2008: 1, 6; Cockram 2010: 241-9). Antheil helped Pound to complete a second version of his opera, *La Testament de Villon,* in 1923. An earlier version, completed in 1921, had been written with the guidance of Agnes Bedford (Moody 2014: 19). Pound settled in Italy in 1924, where he ran a series of music concerts in Rapallo’s city hall during the 1930s with Rudge and Gerhart Münch(*EPM* 242-320; Bacigalupo 2010: 250-260). In *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), he attempts a further musical theory: ‘great bass’, which develops on ‘absolute rhythm’ (*GK* 73). Musicians and music were a constant feature of Pound’s life and his wide-ranging independent study, yet his approach to music was far from consistent, and the *Treatise* represents one significant turning point.

***The* *Treatise on Harmony***

In Paris, Pound tried to immerse himself in its music, painting and intellectual life. A. David Moody (2014: 6) writes that it was there, in the early 1920s, that Pound decided to ‘contend against the tyranny of the commonly accepted order of things’, and it is in this spirit that *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* should be approached. Its premiseis simple, and thoroughly modernist: compositional techniques urgently need to be re-thought, and if music of any value is to be written, the whole art form must be approached with new eyes. Pound claims that composers have spent too long paying attention to pitch, and compositional techniques need to be modernised to account for the neglect of rhythm. He makes a compelling and exhortation to really start ‘listening to the sound’ of music, but this is framed within a somewhat ambiguous and sparingly described theory (*ATH* 16). *The Treatise* is more interesting and valuable as a deliberately provocative modernist gesture – designed to shock people out of entrenched ways of thinking and behaving – than as a practical or useful theory. Since Pound goes to great lengths to make the theory appear practical, though, it requires some analysis.

Pound describes harmony as that which has a ‘strong lateral or horizontal motion’, concluding that it should be approached, not as something ‘static’, but as an art of movement (*ATH* 11).

the term “Harmony” is applied to the science of chords that can be struck simultaneously; and the directions for modulations have been worked out for chords that can follow each other without demanding a strict or even interesting time-interval between their emission. (*ATH* 12)

For Pound, the amount of time that passes between notes that are played sequentially should structure compositions, rather than functional harmony which, being based around chord progressions, primarily organises notes that are sounded simultaneously.[[3]](#endnote-3) Since sound ‘consists of vibrations’ that happen over periods of time, rhythm (as measurements of pressure occurring over time) is claimed to be the most important and hitherto neglected consideration in a musical composition (*ATH* 23). ‘There is nothing whatever in music,’ Pound writes, ‘than a composition of frequencies’ (*ATH* 38). Pound is interested in how time alters the way these frequencies combine:‘The question of the time-interval that must elapse between one sound and another if the two sounds are to produce a pleasing consonance or an interestingrelation, has been avoided’ (*ATH* 9). The *Treatise* thus makes two central claims: that music is ‘pure rhythm’, and that a sense of ‘absolute rhythm’ should structure music, which should be composed with perfectly timed intervals between notes.

At its inception in 1910, and in its fuller form in the *Treatise*, ‘absolute rhythm’ imagines that there is a ‘law of rhythmic accord’ – as yet unknown – to which great compositions adhere.

Rhythm is perhaps the most primal of all things known to us. It is basic in poetry and music mutually, their melodies depending on a variation of tone quality and of pitch respectively, as is commonly said, but if we look more closely we will see that music is, by further analysis, pure rhythm: rhythm and nothing else, for the variation of pitch is the variation in rhythms of the individual notes, and harmony the blending of these varied rhythms. When we know more of overtones we will see that the tempo of every masterpiece is absolute, and is exactly set by some further law of rhythmic accord. (Pound 1954: 23-4).

Writing here in 1910, Pound argues that ‘masterpieces’ arise when the composition and performance tempo is perfectly balanced so that each note has exactly the right length of time separating it from the next, producing sounds perfectly blended together. The same idea underpins the *Treatise*, although by 1924 Pound leans much more heavily on the existence of mathematical equations that would, in theory, verify his claim that:

the simplest consideration of the physics of the matter by almost the simplest mathematician, should lead to equations showing that A SOUND OF ANY PITCH, OR ANY COMBINATION OF SUCH SOUNDS, MAY BE FOLLOWED BY A SOUND OF ANY OTHER PITCH, OR ANY OTHER COMBINATION OF SUCH SOUNDS, providing the time interval between them is properly gauged. (*ATH* 13)

A mathematical formula, Pound suggests, could explain the length of time that ought to pass between notes to create a pleasing effect, and this would provide evidence for his theory of harmony. In the absence of these rules, however, composers should just ‘really listen to sound’. A particular relation between two chords, he says, ‘is probably perfectly sound. I mean from the point of view of mathematics’, but gives no further explanation, and claims ‘it seems unlikely that any mathematician will bother’ to decipher these rules (*ATH* 15). Asserting that a precise mathematical principle *would* prove the theory, if anyone could work it out, lends it the appearance of objectivity, while the lack of verification is useful: it allows Pound to frame his own judgements about music as empirically true and mathematically verifiable, while ensuring he does not have to alter any of his existing ideas about which music is valuable.

Pound is looking for ways to validate his aesthetic judgements by claiming great compositions adhere to laws of physics and maths that give them universal and unchanging significance. The theory is a way of arriving at what Stephen J. Adams (1980: 63) calls a ‘Pythagorean music of the spheres’ – a fundamental law or ordering system for music. Pound gestures briefly to Pythagorean observations about musical sounds and their relationship to ratios when he says, ‘music as the ancient philosophers say, arises from number’ (*ATH* 24). Pythagoras is credited with discovering the relationship between musical pitch and mathematical ratio, noticing that strings of the same material and tautness with the length ratio 2:1 will produce sounds an octave apart: an observation that appeared to point to coherence in the natural world, and a connection between mathematics and aesthetics. ‘Absolute rhythm’ extends Pythagorean observations about the relationship between mathematical order and beauty, by claiming that the best compositions – such as those by Bach – are those that abide by natural laws: ‘The secret or part of it probably is that Bach, consciously or unconsciously, never thought of using two chords except as parts, integral parts, of a progression, a rhythmic progression’ (*ATH* 13). Bach, Pound says, was ‘consciously or unconsciously’ following the rules in the *Treatise,* and other accomplished composers have followed the rules naturally, without conscious effort, while poor musicians and their music are the result of imprecision.

The difficulty of the *Treatise* has split critical opinion. Pound’s didactic writing style claims a level of authority that is not matched by the understanding on show, which is often allusive and vague since he declines to explain the mathematical justification for his ideas. The *Treatise’s* claims about the temporal aspects of harmony share similarities with Katherine Heyman’s book *The Relation of Ultramodern to Archaic Music* (1921: 54), in which she argues for a ‘rhythm of what we would call in music “Interval”’. Pound does not point his reader in the direction of this much more detailed and theoretically sound text, which would certainly help understand the ideas that he gestures towards.[[4]](#endnote-4) For Erin E. Templeton *The* *Treatise* is full of ‘abstract and fanciful’ claims (2009: 71), while for Margaret Fisher (2010: 298), the reason for Pound’s ambiguity is often ‘his own musical ignorance’, although it could be an attempt to preserve some of music’s transcendent and mystifying qualities in keeping with Pound’s interest in the Occult (Fisher 2013). The disparity in critical receptions of the work indicates the difficulty in deciding by what standard it is appropriate to judge it: as a practical theory, or a provocative encouragement to think differently. Suggesting that myriad composers have failed to properly listen to sound is confrontational and inflammatory, as Pound well knew: remarking on his own writing, he said, ‘They will hang me possibly as an academic but scarcely as a dynamitist’ (*SL* 231).

**Strategies of modernisation**

The *Treatise* is evidence of Pound’s attempt to modernise not just musical composition, but his own aesthetics, too. Pound acquired a great appreciation of even metre during the 1920s, even though he had previously been very suspicious of it. ‘Stravinsky’s merit,’ he claims in the *Treatise,* ‘lies very largely in taking hard bits of rhythm and noting them with great care. Antheil continues this’ (*EPM* 258). This is a very different kind of music from that which features in Pound’s 1912 Imagist principles:

1. Direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. To compose *in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome*. (*LE* 3)

The ‘sequence of the musical phrase’ refers to the rhythms of melodic phrasing, so that music offers poetry melodic and tonal qualities combined with rhythms. Regular beats, like those of a metronome, were to be avoided at all costs. Writing in *The New Age* in 1919, Pound reiterated that his rhythms were ‘not merely clock-work of the bar-lengths. Measured time is only one form of rhythm; but a true rhythm sense assimilates all sorts of uneven pieces of time, and keeps the music alive’ (*EPM* 472). Here Pound’s rhythm is holistic and deeply connected to life, like the rhythms of the seasons or the human body. Pound thus appears to have significantly changed his opinion about rhythm in the *Treatise*, wherehe advocates the clock-work rhythms he previously criticised. He finds these rhythms in Antheil’s music, which draws on the sounds of machines:

Music is the art most fit to express the fine quality of machines. Machines are now a part of life, it is proper that men should feel something about them; there would be something weak about art if it couldn’t deal with this new content. (*ATH* 53).

Using Antheil as the prime example, the *Treatise* seeks to show that music can speak to contemporary existence by communicating the rhythms of new technology. In Antheil, Pound heard the sounds of a particularly modern sensibility, perfect for the expression of contemporary life. Pound connects the sounds and movements of machinery to music as a rhythmic, temporal and sonic art form, reasoning that music can communicate rhythms of life that are now mediated by the factory, and technologies which have altered relationships with time. Antheil’s ‘musical world’, Pound said, ‘is a world of steel bars, not of old stone and ivy’ (*ATH* 62). In other words, his music is of a new world created of the same vertical steel that constructs the factory. It is built differently, from new materials: the architecture of a new age.

As Pound modernises his approach, away from ‘the sequence of the musical phrase’, he loses sight of his earlier way of thinking about and describing music. Its connection to poetry disappears: there is little indication in the *Treatise* about what music can offer poetry. For Josh Epstein this shift is specifically due to Pound’s friendship with Antheil. Epstein (2014: 101) recasts the title of Hugh Kenner’s critical biography to argue for the composer’s influence on Pound’s thought: it is not *The Pound Era*, but ‘The Antheil Era’. To be sure, Antheil is integral to the ideas in *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* – as the title indicates. As the self-styled ‘bad boy’ of contemporary music, Antheil provided the ‘new music’ Pound claimed he had been looking for since ‘the Vorticist manifestos of 1913-14’ which ‘left a blank space for music’ (*ATH* 37). Antheil appears in each section of the book. In Part I, ‘The Treatise on Harmony’, Antheil is proffered as an expert who agrees with Pound, having ‘known for some time that the duration of the notes and the duration of the time-intervals between them made a difference to the way the harmony sounded’ (*ATH* 22). Part II is Pound’s warm appraisal of ‘Antheil’, first published in *The Criterion* in 1924. To bulk out *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* for publication in book form in October that year, and again in 1927, Pound refines and curates his writing on music from different publications. Part III, ‘Atheling’, collects extracts of Pound’s music reviews written under his pseudonym, William Atheling, which are interspersed with approving comments and asides initialled ‘G. A.’ (George Antheil). The younger composer is mobilised to lend some weight to Pound’s musical judgements. The final chapter, ‘Varia’, reproduces sections of essays on music printed in *New Masses* and *New Criterion*, and Antheil is prominent here, too: they begin with an appeal to ‘take note of Antheil’ (*ATH* 138).

Central as Antheil is to Pound’s book, his music did not provoke Pound’s shift from ‘the sequence of the musical phrase’ to ‘hard bits’. Epstein (2014: xxviii) notes that Pound’s championing of the quotidian music of the factory is indebted to thinkers from whom he wilfully asserts his difference: ‘Pound railed against Marinetti and Russolo on one hand while cribbing liberally from them on the other’. The Italian Futurist, F.T. Marinetti’s (1998: 256) ‘wish to destroy the sublime Art-with-a-capital-A’ motivates Pound’s desire in *The Treatise* to find a ‘new music’. Russolo’s ‘Art of Noises’ underpins Pound’s admiration of Antheil’s ‘hard bits’ of rhythm that provide the music of machines, moving away from art as separate from everyday concerns and re-connecting music to daily life. Pound found having a musician to give credibility to his ideas useful, but in Antheil’s *Ballet mécanique* he discovered the perfect demonstration of an aesthetic of precision that he had been developing for some time: something that was influenced by Théophile Gautier’s poetics, and Rémy de Gourmont’s ideas about the importance of judgement and discrimination.

**Gautier and Gourmont**

The phrase ‘hard bits’ was directly derived from Gautier, who shaped the rhetorical language of *The* *Treatise*. In ‘The Hard and the Soft in French Poetry’ (1918), Pound refers to Gautier’s poem, ‘L’art’, which compares the poet to a sculptor who works in a tough, recalcitrant medium. Gautier ‘exhorts us to cut in hard substance, to cut, metaphorically, in hard stone’ (*P&P* III: 55). Constructing verse, like sculpture, becomes hard work; just like cutting stone, working with language is difficult if something great is to be achieved. By claiming that Stravinsky and Antheil work in ‘hard bits’ of rhythm, Pound claims a level of difficulty for their art that Gautier describes as characteristic of the best work. Pound found Gautier unique among nineteenth-century French writers, most of whom he did not admire. In 1913, lamenting British ignorance about the Provençal poets, he complained that few knew ‘anything beyond Verlaine and Baudelaire’, who ‘beget imitation and one can learn nothing from them. Gautier and de Gourmont’, on the other hand, ‘carry forward the art itself, and the only way one can imitate them is by making more profound your knowledge of the very marrow of art’ (*SL* 23).

Gautier’s metaphor of hardness and sculpture was suitable for Pound’s poetics of linguistic precision: it fit with the Imagist principles of direct treatment and economy of language, as though cutting away at excess words to produce a carefully crafted poem. When transferring this metaphor onto music, though, Pound uses it much more literally. Pound’s explanation of the value of Antheil’s music is in how close he gets to a “solid object”:

In “The Golden Bird” he was not wholly freed of Debussy, but he did succeed in making the “solid object”. This term suggests sculpture and is intended to, just as Debussy intended to suggest apparitions in mist. By solid object “musically”, I suppose we mean a construction or better a “mechanism” working in time-space, in which all the joints are close knit, the tones fit each other at set distances, it can’t simply slide about. (*ATH* 48-9)

Since music does not signify in the same way as language, and often does not appear to refer to objects or ideas, it cannot be judged by the accuracy of what it represents, and Pound needs another way of using Gautier to think about music. Pound transports conceptual hardness (rather than difficulty) onto music, and in a simple way, advocating harsh sounds and jolting rhythms. The more nuanced aspects of Gautier’s claim about the effort required in artistic production are lost when Pound discusses music, which becomes quite simply the “solid object”. Pound chooses not to judge Debussy, for example, on the precision or artistry with which he represents ‘Le vent dans la plaine’ (‘The wind in the plain’), or ‘La mer’ (‘The sea’), which might be performed with just as much rhythmic precision as a composition that includes harsh sounds. It is as though it is Debussy’s themes, being wind and water rather than “solid objects”, as much as the music itself that make him the perfect opposite to Gautier’s aesthetic of hardness.

Pound’s shift towards the ‘solid object’ and ‘hard bits’ of rhythm in the *Treatise* was a modernisation strategy: through this language he distanced himself from nineteenth-century aesthetics by constructing an opposition between his hard precision and the vague softness of the romantics and symbolists. As early as 1915 Pound had felt under pressure to change his poetics, of which music was a central part. He knew Imagism was being compared to symbolism, so much so that he had to declare outright: ‘Imagisme is not symbolism. The symbolists dealt in “association”, that is, a sort of allusion, almost of allegory. They degraded the symbol to the status of a word’ (*GB* 84). Pound rejected the symbolists’ propensity, as he saw it, to make words into symbols, codifying language and removing the powerful potential of the word. For Pound, this technique abstracted language from its true meaning and connoted an absence of precision.

Like the symbolists, however, Pound was interested in something beyond ‘the word’, which he felt music could provide for language. Pound’s *vers libre*, which sought to combine poetry and music via melodic phrasing, was rooted in a belief that music could energise language: ‘the perception of the intellect is given in the word, the emotions in the cadence’ (Pound 1954: 23). While rhythm becomes all in *The Treatise*, writing here in 1910, Pound was still interested in musical pitch: ‘cadence’ refers to the shared tonal qualities of music and verse, and not just rhythm. The idea that music is particularly suitable for expressing the emotions has a great historical precedent, and Schopenhauer is a central reference point for music as a form of absolute communication that gets directly to the emotions. For Schopenhauer (2014: 289), music

does not express this or that individual or particular joy, this or that sorrow or pain or horror or exaltation or cheerfulness or peace of mind, but rather joy, sorrow, pain, horror, exaltation, cheerfulness and peace of mind as such in themselves, abstractly.

For Schopenhauer, music is a direct expression of the emotions, rather than a description. The abstract and emotive qualities of music to which Pound reaches belongs to a long tradition of associating music with essences, as opposed to language, which merely points to things. As Brad Bucknell (2001: 3) notes, modernist appeals to music as a model for expressing the emotions are ‘a kind of strange recuperation of a romantic belief in the expressive potential of music and in its capacity to go beyond the mere rationality of language’. This conceptualisation of music is present in Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Wagner, Nietzsche and Pater, to name but a few – as well as the literary traditions of symbolism and decadence more broadly. The similarity between aspects of Pound’s thought and that of Mallarmé, for example, is well-documented (Albright 2000: 75; Bucknell 2001: 17, 72; Hamilton 1992).

Pound did not wish to be associated with the symbolists, however, whom he argued dealt in abstractions rather than specifics. The poet, he said, following on from Gautier, should ‘Put down exactly what you feel and mean! Say it as briefly as possible and avoid all sham of ornament.’[[5]](#endnote-5) When trying to describe what music offered poetry, however, Pound was not able to abide by his own doctrines of linguistic precision. Describing *vers libre*, for example, he runs into problems: itis for ‘when the “thing” builds up a rhythm more beautiful than a set of metres, or more real, more a part of the emotion of the “thing”, more germane, intimate’ (*LE* 9). As Pound makes multiple attempts in this sentence to explain what music is for, he falls into using the allusions and abstractions to which he was so averse. Music was essential for poetic composition, but since Pound could not always clearly describe what he felt music offers poetry, it presented him with a dilemma. He wanted to harness its unique qualities of expression to communicate ‘the emotion of the “thing”’, but when describing how to incorporate music into poetry he often resorted to the abstract verboseness of which he disapproved. Pound’s aesthetics of clarity and precision were being foiled by his inability to describe music in precise terms. By 1924, much had changed: this language and conceptualisation of music is notably absent in the *Treatise*, which suggests an (hypothetical) objective mathematical principle by which great music could be judged. Although Pound is unable to offer the formula, it reveals how keen he is to use mathematics and pseudo-scientific approaches – or to appear as someone who is able to use the sciences – to explain and justify his position on music.

Rémy de Gourmont influenced this drive towards an objective, mathematical way of measuring musical value. Pound had been reading Gourmont since at least 1915, and had translated his *Natural Philosophy of Love* in France in 1921, publishing it in 1922. Gourmont had an entirely different understanding of music. While *motz el son,* or words and music, remained an integral part of Pound’s poetics, for Gourmont music was a dangerously affective art form. Music and sound, which vibrate the body, could directly affect the nervous system, stimulating the emotions before the effect could be properly processed by the rational mind, impeding objective judgements. Vincent Sherry has explored the history of these ideas and their political implications, explaining how in Revolutionary France, the capacity of music to affect the body and create group feeling, specifically empathy and solidarity among the masses, created discourses of music and sound as overwhelming, and appealing to base instincts (Sherry 1995: 1-23)*.* Gourmont favoured the visual arts, because he found the eye capable of a greater level of discrimination and judgement – something that Sherry argues pushes Pound to ‘conceive of music in visual terms’ (Sherry 1995: 184). This is everywhere in *The* *Treatise’s* language of vertical and ‘horizontal’ music, of music as the ‘solid object’ and of Antheil’s constructions of ‘steel bars’ (*ATH* 11, 48, 62). We can see Pound digesting Gourmont’s ideas, whose book he was then translating, in the language he used to describe Fauré in a letter to Agnes Bedford in 1921. Pound wrote to Bedford that he had ‘Sat through the *Pélleas*’ – Fauré’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* – and, outraged by the ‘mush of hysteria’ that he associated with the Romantic composer, found himself ‘encouraged—encouraged to tear up the whole bloomin’ era of harmony and do the thing if necessary on two tins and a wash board’ (*SL* 167). Pound rejects Fauré’s ‘mush’, finding it ruined by a lack of precision, while ‘hysteria’ gestures to his suspicion of music that creates irrational, uncontrolled emotional responses. The *Treatise* ‘tears up’ harmony by arguing for an entirely new way of thinking about composition, which rejects anything that arouses the emotions in favour of a scientific way of measuring music’s value.

For Pound, Fauré belonged to the same ‘atmospheric’ school as Debussy, and they were creating a dangerous kind of emotionally intoxicating music, for which Antheil’s rhythmic precision was an artistic antidote. Composers, Pound said, have ‘rotted their melodies by trying to find schemes which “harmonize” according to a concept of “harmony” in which the tendency to lifelessness was inherent’ (*ATH* 19). Pound’s metaphors of death and decay liken functional harmony to rotting organic substances: those who use it do so even though it is no longer alive and fruitful. Standard harmony becomes an infectious disease in Pound’s language, destroying compositions from within. A preoccupation with disease and the body shows how Pound is thinking about art through discourses associated with science and natural history. Again, Pound came to these ideas through Gourmont: *Natural Philosophy of Love* sought to explain human development, emotion, interaction and artistic production in biological terms. Gourmont argued that civilisation did not bypass natural ability, but accentuated it: ‘The taste for brilliant things, another human instinct is frequent enough in birds; it is true that birds have not yet made anything of it, and that man has evolved the sumptuary arts’ (Gourmont 1922: 188-9). Valuable and accomplished art, for Gourmont, was produced by individuals who had reached the pinnacle of human evolutionary development, while poor art and judgements were made by people with poorer cognitive abilities: physiologically inferior people and races. Pound’s rhetoric of progress and degeneration also serves to position him at the top of a hierarchy, as someone capable of making these judgements about the state of the arts. *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* is Pound’s attempt to justify what constitutes great art through the sciences, and to cement his position as a talented artistic commentator with an advanced capacity for aesthetic judgement.

Together, Gautier and Gourmont provided Pound with a new way of thinking about music. Informed by Gourmont’s claims that emotionally affective music was toxic to reason and critical thought, Pound rejected Impressionist and Romantic music. In line with Gourmont’s conviction that the skilled aesthete could make careful, objective judgements, Pound sought to validate his ideas about valuable music through mathematics. He used Gautier’s sculptural metaphor to provide a language suitable to talk about music as an art of precision, which he united through the metaphor of hardness with the harsh rhythms in Antheil’s music. Through this language, he was finally able to talk about music without resorting to allusion and metaphor, and he promoted avant-garde music to support and modernise his aesthetic judgements. Pound’s position on music is not consistent, though. In ‘How to Read’ (1929), he is still committed to an idea of music that cannot be explained as ‘pure rhythm’. Music, he says, is ‘a force tending often to lull, or distract the reader from the exact sense of the language. It is poetry on the borders of music and music is perhaps the bridge between consciousness and the unthinking sentient or even insentient universe’ (*LE* 26). Pound retains a commitment to notions of musical transcendence, describing melopoeia (musical language) as that ‘wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning’ to something that is ‘practically impossible to transfer or translate’ (*LE* 25). The shift from his early advocacy of musical melody to rhythmic precision is thus part of a complex negotiation on Pound’s part between wanting to harness music’s indescribable essence for use in poetry, describe it accurately, and carve for himself a unique space among the radical innovators of the early twentieth century.

1. NOTES

   Pound refers to ‘absolute rhythm’ in a number of texts between 1910 and 1927, and these are collected in Appendix I in *EPM* 467-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The various manifestations of the four essays that comprise *The Treatise on Harmony* are helpfully collected by Schafer,who indicates the changes made between the article and book versions. *EPM* 253-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Pound’s designation of functional harmony as being concerned with ‘static’ chords lacks nuance. Compositions are also organised through harmonic progressions, which means the relationships between successive chords are considered. As is often the case with Pound’s writing, it is unclear whether this demonstrates Pound’s lack of knowledge, or whether he does this intentionally to make his own ideas appear more significant. Claiming that theories of harmony deal only with notes sounded simultaneously is not quite accurate, but it does create a space into which Pound’s own theory can be neatly inserted. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Pound may have harboured anxieties about being compared with Heyman, despite their close friendship and his admiration for her. Writing to Harriet Shaw Weaver on 12th October 1914, he describes ‘a rather longish article’ he is preparing for *The Egoist* ‘announcing the College of Arts’, in which Heyman and Dolmetsch are listed as teachers. The letter also contains the request that ‘Miss Heyman’s article might precede Rodker’s. Please do not put it next to mine’ (*SL* 41). For Pound and Heyman’s relationship see Bowers 1973: 53-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ezra Pound, ‘Patria Mia: V,’ *The New Age*, 11.23, October 3, 1912, 539-40. Reprinted in *Ezra Pound’s Poetry and Prose*, 11 vols (London: Garland, 1991), I, C56, 90-100 (99). Also: Ezra Pound (1950) *Patria Mia*, Chicago: R. F Seymour, 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)