

Paul Bowles

A PICNIC CANTATA

libretto by James Schuyler

NOTES & LYICS



NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY STEVEN BLIER

Paul Bowles' *A Picnic Cantata* has been something of a NYFOS signature piece ever Michael Barrett came across it in the stacks of the Library of the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. He knew it would be perfect for us, and he arranged an appointment for us to hear it together in the Research Division, using their antique plastic headphones. The LP we listened to was long out of print, and the score was available only as a manuscript. Alternatively spiky and lyrical, utterly unpredictable and oddly graceful, Bowles' music won us over. We programmed it on a double bill with a concert reading of André Messager's operetta *L'amour masqué*—a project so ambitious that I had to check my archives to reassure myself that my memory was not deceiving me. We should have renamed ourselves "The New York Festival of Chutzpah."

Michael and I have offered *A Picnic Cantata* a few times—that first production in 1992, a revival when we made our first appearance at Weill Hall in 1994, and a re-mount at Merkin Hall in 2009. We even gave a gala performance of it at Leonard Bernstein's apartment in the Dakota, where one of the audience members was Paul Bowles, then 82 years old, who listened over the telephone from his home in Tangiers---and wished us luck.

We've always yearned to record the work, and now our dream has come true. Returning to Paul Bowles's music and James Schuyler's words for a fourth time has been a pleasure and something of a revelation. In the three decades since we first encountered *Picnic Cantata*, we've learned more about both the composer and the poet. Its colors seem more vibrant than ever.

Paul Bowles was born in 1910, a native of New York City. His creative life was always divided between music and literature. As a child he wrote stories and poems, and by the time he was 17 his work had been published in the magazine *Transition*, alongside poetry and prose by Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and André Gide. In his adolescence he dabbled in music as well, composing pieces on his family's piano. He tried going to college at the University of Virginia, decided he was wasting his time, and hopped on a ship for Paris without letting his parents know. Upon his return a few months later, he plunged into music study with Henry Cowell, who introduced him to Aaron Copland.

Copland became Bowles' teacher and mentor, even though Bowles hadn't truly made a decision whether to pursue literature or music as a career. He returned to Paris to meet up with Copland. Bowles's charm, wit, erudition, and good looks

endeared him to Gertrude Stein and indeed to the entire Parisian set, whose denizens included Jean Cocteau, Ezra Pound, and Virgil Thomson. Thomson and Copland saw to it that Bowles' music was heard in London and New York, and by 1933 it was clear that Paul Bowles was a musician to reckon with. Thomson also got his young protégé his first theatrical commissions, beginning with the John Houseman/Orson Welles production of *Horse Eats Hat* in 1936. Bowles' incidental music was to become a feature of over twenty Broadway plays including Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*.

In 1938, Paul Bowles married novelist Jane Auer, and the two lived a peripatetic life. Their favorite ports of call included Mexico, Morocco, and Ceylon—Paul bought himself an island there named Tabropane—with frequent travels elsewhere. Jane preferred to be in New York, where she was part of the hippest artistic circles. But Paul Bowles liked life abroad and would only return to New York when he had to score a new Broadway play or hear the premiere of a new piece he'd written.

Travel may have been Paul Bowles' calling, but his New York stays were far from dull. During the wartime years, Paul and Jane shared a Brooklyn Heights brownstone with a few housemates—Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears in one bedroom, and Gypsy Rose Lee in another. The mind boggles as one tries to imagine their cocktail conversation. After the war the Bowleses lived at 28 West 10th Street, this time sharing their digs with the duo-pianists Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale. Jerome Robbins lived down the block at #26, and Leonard Bernstein was in #32. Fizdale recalled how Bowles and Bernstein would open their studio windows and play piano duets across the airshaft. Paul and Jane Bowles hung out with Marc Blitzstein, Ned Rorem, John Cage, Edwin Denby, and Oliver Smith.

It was Smith who brought Gold and Fizdale together with the poet James Schuyler in 1953. The pianists were enjoying tremendous success, while Schuyler was at the very beginning of his career. He had already become the fourth writer in a group that would eventually be named The New York Poets—Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and John Ashbery were the others. Schuyler was the late bloomer. He had managed to get individual poems into prestigious periodicals, but he didn't publish a complete volume of poetry till the late 1960s. He lacked the bravado and the initiative of his fellow writers. When big stars like Gold and Fizdale offered him a commission to write for them, he jumped at the chance.

The pianists chose their friend Paul Bowles to write the music. Ten years earlier they had hired him, on Copland's recommendation, to write a piece for them, and they had been pleased with the result. The money for this latest commission came

from music patron Alice Esty, who had studied singing with Leontyne Price's teacher Florence Kimball. Esty was an indefatigable and generous patron of song in the 1950s and 60s, and often premiered the works she'd financed. A scrupulous if unexciting performer, she midwived songs by Ned Rorem, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, and many others.

Music was in Schuyler's blood. He was an accomplished amateur pianist—jazz was his thing—and was an ardent fan of both Art Blakey and Sviatoslav Richter. He also loved the late French romantics like Franck and Reynaldo Hahn, and found special inspiration in the music of Fauré, whose combination of sensuality and objectivity mirrored his own poetic voice. Schuyler was compatible with all of his new colleagues, but especially with Arthur Gold, with whom he launched a love affair. Schuyler was shy, somewhat timid, and single, while Gold was a confident man of the world taking a break from his ongoing relationship with Fizdale. (In the meantime, Fizdale enjoyed a dalliance with Frank O'Hara.)

Schuyler ended their relationship a few years after the premiere of *A Picnic Cantata*, but the breakup left him troubled. In its aftermath he had a severe anxiety attack, exacerbated by the sudden deaths of two members of his circle, the painter Violet Lang and the lyricist John Latouche. This breakdown was a precursor of the many bouts of mental illness that would plague him for decades. In the 1960s and 70s Schuyler was institutionalized several times and often lived a marginal existence when he was released. He took heavy doses of psycho-pharmaceuticals, mostly tranquilizers, during the last half of his adult life. His behavior could be erratic and sometimes frightening to his friends. Only a few of them were strong enough to handle him when he was in his darkest phases.

But Schuyler could also be endearing, funny, disarmingly open, and loyal, and this is the man one gets to know through his poetry. He charmed and seduced through his writing, even during periods of distress. He reveals his character in the libretto for *Picnic Cantata*. For example, he was a voracious eater, and the amount of food these women bring on their picnic is a fantasy come true, a gourmet/gourmand's delight. The fifth section reflects his love of flowers, as the ladies read a hilariously lurid version of the garden section in the Sunday paper. Schuyler had an encyclopedic knowledge of plants, and when he writes, "I never miss the garden section,/It describes Heaven to perfection," he is merely stating the truth. And I imagine that the tale in the advice column—a woman agonizing about her affair with a married man—has its parallel in the Schuyler-Gold-Fizdale love triangle. His wry sense of humor is pervasive throughout the libretto—the women are simultaneously self-dramatizing and utterly demure. It wasn't for nothing that he christened himself "Dorabella," after the impulsive, daffy character in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*.

Yes, there is a 50s camp sensibility in *Picnic Cantata*, with its loopy, hyper-realistic descriptions of ordinary things and its emotions swimming to the surface at inappropriate moments. But the work's greatest strength is its delicate balance of sensuality, seriousness, lightness, and irony. The key to the piece is its childlike innocence. In this world a picnic basket seems to hold the entire contents of Zabar's, a car materializes on cue, and the gathering together of these four friends seems like an act of providence. Schuyler melds the bluntness of Gertrude Stein and the fantasy of Maurice Sendak, allowing simple things to become paradoxical and mysterious.

In Paul Bowles, the poet found an ideal collaborator. The composer found a way to bring this world to life in music that mixes bitonality, Poulenc-style post-impressionism, and pure American melody. Each of the work's six movements has its own atmosphere. In the first section, where the ladies meet and make their picnic plans, the music is square and clangorous—the giddiness of four prim people. You can also hear that Bowles has spent some time in Morocco and Ceylon; he uses exotic chords and scales that seem to evoke non-European instruments. The ladies' first stop is Hat Hill Park (named after the mythical freedom-fighter Henry Hat). For this he writes a chorale that evokes the mystical lyricism of Poulenc's religious works. In the third section, the music perks up as the women tuck into the picnic. As they unpack, the women sing in polytonal chords, which (in tandem with the percussion writing) suggest the sounds of gamelan.

The women appear to consume massive amounts of food very quickly, and then settle back to watch the clouds. For the first time we see them in a state of languor, and Bowles allows the harmony to relax as the vocal melodies float by gently. Then it's time for the ladies to read the Sunday paper, starting (of course) with the horoscope. The predictions for Taurus and Gemini burst forth in a flurry of manic energy, ending with triumphant flourishes in the piano. Then the first alto reads the advice column, and we hear the work's only solo song. The tone becomes sincere and poignant, with the most sustained melody in the whole piece. By the end of the letter, we aren't sure whether the singer is reading from the paper or confessing her own guilty secrets to her friends.

The garden section of the paper comes to the rescue with a clangorous tango located somewhere between Asia, Bali, and Brazil. The music chatters, gyrates, and moans as these four proper ladies go native, revealing unsuspected depths of sensuality. After that, they pack up and drive home in a finale that has an odd tone of foreboding and mystery. Suddenly Bowles' music is stern, square, and heavy—who else has written a piece that paints the uncomfortable shift from vacation to work, weekend to weekday, abandon to constraint? With a chorus of “toodle-oo's” the women disappear back into their routines.

Picnic Cantata premiered at Town Hall in 1954. Originally Bowles seems to have thought of it as a piece for male quartet; the first movement is still scored for two tenors, baritone, and bass. But Bowles and Schuyler must have realized that the piece might come across as too precious, too “twee” if sung by men. They instantly recast it for female voices, and engaged four Black American singers from Juilliard’s graduate division. I spoke to Martha Flowers, who sang the first soprano part. She was friends with Robert Fizdale, who sometimes accompanied her voice lessons with Florence Kimball, Alice Esty’s teacher. “He was very reserved and gentle, and what a musician! We *always* sang better when he was there. Arthur Gold was snazzy. Bobby was quieter, and what a wonderful artist.” I wondered how they presented the piece. “Well, we wore concert gowns, no costumes, and we used scores. We didn’t have any staging. Of course, we knew the piece cold—we’d worked on it quite a lot. And we were so enthusiastic about it!” How was it received? “The premiere was a great success, though it was considered a bit avant-garde for its time.” Did the singers find it difficult, then? “Oh, no. It’s not hard.” When I mentioned that her assessment might have been different if she hadn’t been singing the top voice, Martha Flowers burst into laughter. “Well, yes. Perhaps!”

Alas, the collaboration of Schuyler and Bowles was a one-time event. Schuyler never wrote another libretto, and Bowles was already devoting more and more of his time to fiction. According to Ned Rorem, “In 1949, with the publication of *The Sheltering Sky*, Paul Bowles became ‘the author who also writes music,’ after having long been ‘the composer who also writes words.’” Bowles settled in Tangier, far from New York’s Town Hall, leaving behind a small, largely unpublished *oeuvre* for later generations to discover and enjoy. Searching out his music is like participating in a hunt for Easter eggs—a fact I am sure he would enjoy. His novels are dark, but his music often has a sweet, childlike joy. For the twenty-nine minutes of *Picnic Cantata*, all’s right in the world.

SONG LYRICS

I. I feel funny today

but you know what they say:
falls to the floor,
comes to the door.

Who is it you think
might come to the door?
Not the laundry man,
it isn't Monday.
Not the meter reader,
they don't work on Sunday.
Not my cleaning lady,
it isn't Friday.
It might be a mailman
with a special letter,
or a flower shop boy
bringing flowers
from I wonder who?

Or it might be a friend.
It is Sunday.

It is Sunday,
but it's awfully early
for Sunday callers.

Knock, knock.
Who's there?
Open the door.
Open the door who?
Open the door and see.
Good morning, dear,
good morning you,
we thought it might be nice
if you and she
came with me
and we went Sunday driving.

We could make a lunch

and eat a picnic
outside in the sun.

A spring picnic
what a lovely idea
the day is ideal.
What shall we take?
All kinds of things
that are nice to eat.

In the picnic basket I want to find
a roll of lemon rind,
steak and chips,
a T-bone fish,
Milady's Blintzes with white wine sauce
and a pound of Child's creamoginized chocolates.

Four washable plates
and four cloth forks
and lots of napkins.
Napkins are the best part of a picnic.

We can't go on a picnic
without ketchup and a car.
Have you got a car?

You are in my car.

So we are.

Reach me a road map
and I'll map a route.
I love mapping routes
on road maps.
Which route are we on?

Z 3.

Let's see.
We ought to be
on 3 B.
Turn left
at 11 F,

stay on that
til you see a hill
shaped like a hat.

We can eat our lunch
at Hat Hill Park.

My favorite park,
named for Henry Hat.
Read what it says
about him on the map.

II. In our search for order
the way is dangerous.
To help us he brought us
master masons of Chartres.

He bent to no tyrant,
he never relented.
Among them all and among us
his free spirit may find good,
more shared,
more deeply understood.
Man is no longer the servant
nor the victim of many minds.

He doesn't sound
like the sort of person
you might find
eating a picnic lunch
on a Sunday in a park.

Fried chicken and champagne.

Maple syrup and wheats.

Are you hungry already?

I was hungry at the start.

Well here we are.

Are we here already?

We are at
Hat Hill Park.

In sun and shade
on picnic tables
lunches are laid
where cowboys ride
a teeter-totter.

Hot dogs sizzle
on pointed sticks,
root beer fizzes
in paper cups,
and napkins fly.

Good old country air.

You can't beat it.
Out upon the air ride kites
blown, it seems,
from rooms in clouds,
their trailing tails
of knotted wings of cloth
Switching the highest leaves.
Then the draught fails
and the kites fall.

Up into the air rise cries
born, it seems,
like milkweed seed
that float on
the most lightly stirring air
miles from their field and pod.
Then the wind drops
and sounds are lost.

I read in a big-little nature book
that the best way to make a fire
is out of wood.
You get the wood.

There are five kinds of pie.
Which kind will you prefer?

I will surely die
if I eat any pie,
but I can't resist
a slice of cherry.

How flaky the crust,
how moist the filling.

Now we have eaten
who will amuse us?

I will ask your stars
what is in store.
Your stars today
have much to say.

III. Happy birthday Taurus!

The recent weeks
should have been
good ones for you.

Work hard during
the coming year.
The returns should be
the best in some years.

During the summer
take care in July
and use diplomacy:
there may be plenty
of trouble around.

Happy birthday Gemini!
This can be a big point
in a peak year for you.
You always have so many
things you want to do.
Quick on the uptake,
you don't waste time.
You will have a chance
to indulge in good times.
You need to get in there,

get around and be seen.
In the early fall
you may have to readjust.
But on the whole
the year is yours to push.

IV. The Sunday paper is full of news.

Here is a letter, sad as a blues.

I have a heart problem, writes E. Q.

I knew this other man was married
and had a little boy.
He knew I was married
and mother of three.

But we went out together
and discovered
we had many things in common.

Before we realized it
we had to see each other
at least every other day.
We found a kind of love
we'd never known before.
I had to leave him to
come back to my husband.
I felt it only fair to
be honest with my husband.

My husband and I are planning
on moving to this town.
The other man lives there.
I know that we can never
be free to marry
each other
because of the children.
Do you think it
would be a wise move?

5. I never miss the garden section.

It describes heaven to perfection.

Exquisite as a Java sunset,
graceful as a Polynesian dance,
these huge beauties
larger than a dinner plate
burst into bloom
ninety days after planting.

Bali island red
Samoa pink coral
sands of Tahiti white
greenhouse beauty outdoors
larger than a silver dollar.

Stately colorful Darwins
touched with green,
glistening ebony black and maroon,
tulips in balanced color,
flame pink, shaded rose,
glowing orange, shaded yellow,
big plump top-quality bulbs:
all the exotic brilliance
of the colorful tropical birds.

6. How quick we came

from where we were.
The day is over
before it began.

The food is eaten,
the drinks are drunk,
evening arrives
too late to have lunch.

Rinse the thermos
and burn the trash,
wrap the silver
in waxed paper.
This left-over pie
will keep to eat
for after supper
at least a week.

Oh dear, look here,
we forgot all about
the radishes
and the relish.

The car is packed,
have you got your hat?
Where is the map
and my driving glasses?
I hope the road
won't be too crowded.

Is the evening star
Venus or Mars?
I see it set
in the peel of the moon,
a bit of ice
in an ice-tea sky.

Look at the outline
of the city.
No wonder our lives
have their ups and downs.

How well you drive,
and thank you, dears,
I loved the picnic,
it was loads of fun.
We must do it
again, real soon.

Good-bye, toodle-oo,
so long, good-bye.