

## GUNS, GERMS, AND VERBS

Peter Michelson with original music by Jim McVey. *Pacific Plainsong: Cantata*.

*Kevin Ducey*

I listened to Peter Michelson's new disc, *Pacific Plainsongs Cantata*, driving from Minneapolis south on State Hwy 52. It's west of Dylan's Hwy 61, but in its bleak, wintery landscape strung between the twin vacancies of Rochester and Minneapolis, no less apocalyptic. The highway unwinds over the snow-covered hills like Woody's ribbon. It's as though the whole planet, or at least this corner of it were wrapped up as a present. Here you go: take it; this land is your land. Seemed to work for the European settlers. The suspicion remains, however, that it was somebody else's land first, or maybe land don't really *belong* to nobody. Lately, hereabouts, Chinese investors have turned from buying up U.S. Treasury Bonds and Apple stock and have been sinking their money into American farm real estate. Or as Woody would sing now, "jèige guó shì wǒde guó; jèige guó shì nǐde guó."

Just southwest of this rolling, alluvial country, it flattens out and the serious, industrial farms stretch insouciantly out to the Bakken oil fields and the Montana rivers: Tongue, Bighorn, Musselshell. The subject of Michelson's cantata, the bloody second half of the Native American's nineteenth century began not far from here, at the Santee Sioux reservations of western Minnesota. In 1862, the Sioux, upset with the U.S. government's abrogation of treaty obligations and fed up with government Indian Agency corruption, went to war with the state of Minnesota. It didn't go so well for the Indians, or many white people, for that matter—though in the long run the white settlers made out rather well from the war.

Last summer, the Santee war came around again in the Minnesotan consciousness when someone reconstructed the gallows erected at the end of the war. After the Sioux rebellion collapsed, more than three hundred natives were rounded up. I pause here to consider the word "rebellion." A rebellion is something that a citizen undertakes against his or her government. Were the natives citizens? If they were members of a foreign, sovereign state, would they not then have been prisoners of war? The founding of the International Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions were contemporary to the events in Minnesota, but such niceties never seemed to apply to the numerous wars between settlers and natives. In any case, Guantanamo-like, the natives were held in confinement for several months while the white officers

and politicians maneuvered to have the Indians executed, while not actually having to sign off on it themselves.

Then-President Lincoln intervened personally, and after reviewing the trial record, had all but 38 of the captives released, or at least sent to prison. The state then hung those 38 men in a grotesque gallows, especially constructed to kill all of the prisoners simultaneously, in the largest mass execution in the country's history. In 2016, a contemporary artist decided that it would be a good idea to reconstruct a full-scale model of the gallows at Minneapolis' art museum. This didn't go over so well with the native descendents of those people executed in 1862. We had a couple months of culture war back and forth in the media. This is not the same as a rebellion. We heard a lot about those pesky artists, why don't they behave? Or, we had articles in the paper from people standing up for the artist's intention to raise uncomfortable questions. Nobody quite got around to questions of mass-execution, or other, less sculptural methods of ethnic cleansing. The artist and the museum, suitably chastened, allowed the local tribal agencies to dismantle the gallows, haul it away, burn, and bury it someplace unspoken.

2

What gets spoken, who gets to speak, and what are the words available to them in this speaking? These are the questions that run bright thread through Michelson's poem. The text of the recording is excerpted from the book *Pacific Plainsong*, which was first published in the 1970s. I read it as an undergraduate student, and it's one I still pull off the shelf and re-read and keep some of the lines in my heart. Perhaps by way of excerpting his poem, or as a result of the emphasis that performance brings to a piece of writing, certain themes come forward in the cantata, which were less salient in the book.

Michelson performs sections of the poem himself, along with Judith Aplon and Jim McVey. McVey also provides the original musical compositions and keyboard accompaniment. Much of the text is taken from the historical record of white and native encounters. H.H. Bancroft (the once and future UC Berkeley library), George Vancouver, Chiefs Seattle, Joseph, Cochise, and others here have their say. The disc, and the book, begins with Bancroft's account from 1845 of the European settlement of the Puget Sound region, and circles back to end with Lewis and Clark's account of their reception by the Nez Perce in 1805. The second cut on the recording employs the words of George Vancouver, the explorer and mapmaker of the Pacific Coast. His first impressions of the Nez Perce were not flattering:

“Today I met a rude, humble people...scarcely better than animals...the women busily engaged like swine, rooting up the beautiful verdant meadow in quest of wild onions....”

—George Vancouver in 1792.

Michelson’s reading of the text makes clear the inflections that a pre-conceived notion can draw over a landscape.

...a *people*, yes but rude  
 & humble, scarcely better—in  
 fact in context—the equivalent  
 of swine...a rude &  
 humble people, the equal of swine animal  
 unclean...*rude rood* ME. AS. OFr. L. akin to Gk.  
 ME. AS. OFr. L.  
 akin to Gk. *rood* the dream  
 of the rood....

...we are  
 the heirs of arrogance set sail  
 with the gift of fire, with  
 the advantage of Greek...  
*hybris hybris*  
 certified sane  
 we take delight therein...

One might hear the echo of Olson’s “I have not th’advantage...,” but an argument here is made with a longer take-off roll. It’s been noted that a certain mythic paradigm has been moving west since Aeneas hoisted his father on his back and headed to the Tiber. That’s the story as the Latins had it from the Greeks, and there are those who would say that the European movement across the North American continent was nothing more or less than recapitulations of Turnus and Aeneas with six-guns at high noon—when the sun god gets his brightest notions. The story probably even starts farther back, before the Latin and Trojan dispute, to the Proto-Indo-Europeans (PIE), out on the Eurasian steppe, when the first person jumped on one of his or her herd animals (probably as a joke, we are told), and discovered that horse wasn’t just good eating. Those peoples hitched their wains (PIE) to their stars (also PIE) and started west gathering momentum and transmuting linguistically, practically ouroborically, all the way back to Asia, finally exhausting itself in a rice paddy outside of Saigon.

It’s so obvious that it usually goes unspoken, that the European movement across the North American continent was the progression of a particu-

lar language with its peculiar usages and mechanisms built in and ready to unpack. Akin to Mr. Burrough's virus, it was another of the fatal horsemen that arrived with the European explorers. Michelson's book may be the song of guns, germs, and verbs.

In the North American context, the heavily shaken cocktail of languages (Proto-Indo-European, Greek, Latin, Old German, Old French, Norse, and various middle Englishes) that we call "English" arrived via the contagion of the English Romantics in the early 1800s. It's as though the language emerged from its Latin and Greek constraints and, as it was truly spoken, took ship and escaped to new worlds. The shadow cast by this outbreak of English beyond its somewhat fusty island home, continues to haunt our speech. The cultural freight of the Romantic project, and to some extent the Victorians, lies as heavily on one's ears now as the cultural impact of the 1960s to succeeding generations of musicians.

If English were an exploding star, its supernova was coeval with the defeat of its linguistic rival at Waterloo in 1815—not long after Lewis and Clark met the Nez Perce in 1805. Wordsworth was finishing up his first draft on his Prelude to friendship as the explorers were enjoying the hospitality of the Northwest tribes. The apogee of that westward impulse seems to have been the attempt by the United States to sort out the Vietnamese. English in its weaponized form has been receding since the helicopters abandoned Saigon—about the same time as Michelson was wrapping up the *Pacific Plainsong*.

The cantata gives particular attention to Michelson's home region of the Pacific Northwest—the native experience of the Seattle region and the Nez Perce. One hesitates to use the word tragedy, because a word like that carries enough potential energy to level another Tenochtitlan. Tragedy is part of the obsessive language rituals that the cantata seeks to examine. "Tragedy" is part of the settlement the Europeans brought with them to these shores. Michelson's etymology of Vancouver's words circle around the 17th century prose, slowly unskinning the lineage from common currency to old French, Latin, and to the Greek – where Michelson pauses to draw the poison.

Who speaks? And whose language tells the tale? In calling attention to the first words Michelson urges the listener to check those mythic impulses at the door. Whose katharsis was enacted on the Little Bighorn? On the Washita, or at Sand Creek, or at My Lai, for that matter?

Simone Weil's reading of the *Iliad* sees balance in force between antagonists. Force in Greek tragedy breeds more force and vengeance, until some settlement of justice is found. In any story of native and European confrontation there may be force, occasionally even balance, but one finds precious

little justice. Farther south, where Hwy 61 runs along the Mississippi, you can still trace the path of Black Hawk and the last days of the Sauk at their river crossing near the Wisconsin towns of Bad Axe and Victory.

## 3

In any project such as this, one wonders at the provenance of reported speech. Translators on the scene were notoriously sketchy. Certain native leaders learned to be careful of who rendered their words into the foreigner's tongue. Red Cloud of the Sioux would only work with translators he trusted when he went into meetings with the whites. And the whites themselves were not above embellishing reports of the natives' speech. Etymology isn't the only thing the English caught from the Romans. There are rhetorical procedures to be observed when one sets out to destroy one's enemies. The Roman historians always gave fine speeches (delivered in perfect Latin) to the Celt and Alemanni leaders before they were executed. Somehow it made the Caesars' triumphs sweeter. Similarly, the Spanish in Central and South America reported fine examples of rhetoric from Atahualpa and Motecuhzoma. That being said, in order for a native leader to hold lordship over a polity (pre-Facebook/Twitter), rhetorical facility would have been a necessity. I'm perfectly willing to grant Chief Seattle, or Joseph (Hinmatoo Yahlatlat) their panopoeia, melopoeia, their logopoeia. Here as Michelson sings it:

...Hear  
 me white man as I hear you the  
 Earth is mother of all Hear  
 me white  
 man as you move the mountains Earth  
 white man is mother and  
 wisdom comes  
 in dreams it's  
 cold our children cold our  
 chiefs are dead hear  
 me Hear me my chiefs from  
 where the sun now stands I  
 will fight no more  
 forever Hinmatoo Yahlatlat  
 has spoken for his people

Or Seattle:

*It matters little where we pass the remnant of our days—they will not be many. A few more moons, a few more winters...tribe follows tribe, and nation nation like the*

*waves of the sea—that is nature's order. Regret is useless. Your decay may be distant, but it will surely come. Even the white man whose God walked and talked with him as friend with friend cannot deny his destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see...*

The cantata tracks through the various calvaries of Nez Perce, Sioux, and Apache, but Michelson's poem isn't simply a recapitulation of a string of lost causes and broken treaties.

...This

story, though often told, has been projected  
so transpicuous its plot must thicken  
into mush. And it is after all  
the lucid soul of things the  
thing's soul whatever  
it may be the soul of  
we must discover.

This quote begins a digression or invocation of the antecedents of the American Empire in the Roman and Athenian franchises. As Michelson points out, even though our own histories of empire are equivocal, the project of empire seems hardwired into the stories we tell. Phoenicians, Romans with their Christians, and Pericles all take a brief turn. The Melian dialog of Thucydides may have been apropos as well, where an overmatched community asks fruitlessly for mercy and reasonable behavior from an imperial power. The entire Plainsong may be heard as one long Melian dialog. Gibbons' indictment of the folly of imperial overreach in Iraq also comes to mind. Rather than Weil's balance between antagonists, empire demands subjection—even when an objective view would counsel prudence and perhaps (even) understanding and kindness.

## 4

By the time I reached Rochester, the recording had come to its final track; returning at the last to the encounter between the Nez Perce and the Lewis and Clark expedition. The words Michelson gives us come from M. Lewis. The explorer records that at the welcome feast for the expedition an old man among the natives prophesied that the visitors were not to be trusted:

Meanwhile he—Lewis—scrupulously  
reported, outside the lodge the women  
cried, wrung their hands, and tore their hair, as

if, he said, they  
 were going to inevitable destruction.  
 And the old man  
 the old man said we were bad men, bad  
 men who had come, most  
 probably, to kill...*And the women, he  
 recorded, cried  
 and tore, he said, their hair.*

Violence and scapegoat is embedded in our language and we can't not say it. The recording was over. By now Hwy 52 had carried me past Rochester, I was south of New Ulm, and the execution ground of Mankato. I would turn east toward the river crossing just north of where the Sauk were cut down in Black Hawk's war. Tragedy, Gk—from the word *tragos* "goat," though my dictionary can't tell me why.

we came, by any historical calculations, we  
 came most probably, whatever we supposed, we  
 came, as our leader's [Lewis's] journal remains  
 to remind us, we came most probably in  
 order and well prepared to kill.

Accordingly, we took our leave  
 of these friendly, honest people.

On another journey, in 2007, I was traveling between Shanghai and Beijing on a crowded plane. At 30,000 feet in the air, I fell into conversation with the middle-aged man sitting next to me. He was, he told me, an information officer for the Chinese government. After the usual pleasantries, he confessed that he felt Americans did not have a very positive view of China's actions in Tibet. I allowed that that was the case—when Americans thought about Tibet at all. After all, the Tibetans had a long history of independence and were a separate culture from the Han. My seatmate sighed. Yes, it was unfortunate that bad things had happened between China and Tibet, but, he argued, it is ever the case that an expanding power displaces indigenous people. Isn't that what the Americans did to its native people? How can Americans now criticize China?

Maybe we will be brothers after all, Chief Seattle. Maybe so.

*\*Pacifica Plainsong: Cantata* CD is available by post from: P.M. Cantata, 4828 Twin Lakes Rd. # 8, Boulder, CO 80301. With check or money order (to P. Michelson) for \$14 (\$4 postage, \$10 CD) and return address.

Selections of *Pacifica Plainsong* will appear in Michelson's forthcoming *Mixed Frequencies East & West, New & Selected Poems*. MadHat Press, [www.MadHat-Press.com](http://www.MadHat-Press.com).