

The third of the short occasional movements composed in 1963 when the Zukofskys were still working on *Catullus*, “A”-20 was written and numbered for Paul Zukofsky’s 20<sup>th</sup> birthday in October 1963. Aside from simply quickly ticking off a few movements at a point when it may have felt like he would never get to the finish line, these three movements (the others are “A”-16 and -17) have a personal, even private feel, yet at the same time are relatively simple compared with the oblique density of the other, longer late movements. The numbering of “A”-17 and “A”-20 out of sequence but according to relevant birthdays of the specific people they are dedicated to, also throws a different wrinkle into a rigidly chronological numbering, and Zukofsky was a formalist who habitually threw in unpredictable variants—rarely are his seemingly rigorous forms rigidly rigorous. Orders are not determinative but discovered in the process of the realization of the poem.

The overall concept or structure of “A”-20 is simple enough—there are two halves which represent Paul at age 20 and age 9 respectively, and much of the interest is in the difference.<sup>1</sup> As Zukofsky indicates in the opening line, the first half is structured as a “tone row.” Zukofsky mimics this musical structure using a list of the titles of Paul’s musical compositions, apparently reflecting those that at age 20 he wished to preserve arranged in chronological order as determined by Celia. “A”-20’s first row gives this chronological list, and then Zukofsky used his own arbitrary formulas to come up with the following three variations.<sup>2</sup> The second half of the movement consists of a poem Paul composed at age nine based on a famous song by Henry VIII.<sup>3</sup>

To begin with there is a sharp difference between the traditionally based poem by the younger Paul and later modernist work Zukofsky constructs out of his titles. It is interesting to listen to Zukofsky reading “A”-20, and we have at least two recordings of him doing so.<sup>4</sup> He finds it difficult to read the first half in his usual, somewhat sing-song lyrical manner which constantly breaks down or requires abrupt alterations of speed, whereas the traditional song falls readily into a conventional poetic swing—in other words, there is a clear contrast of modernist and traditional rhythm. The 20-year-old Paul was increasingly involved with modernist and contemporary music of which he has been and continues to be a major performer and producer. The first half of “A”-20 cannot be called a composition by Paul, but

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<sup>1</sup> The image of Paul at age 9 seems to have had special resonance for Zukofsky, which is perhaps partially explained at “A”-13.305.19-23 where he mentions a photo he kept in his wallet of Paul at age 9½. This may be the same photo presumably referred to in “I’s (pronounced *eyes*)” (CSP 214) of the nine-year-old fiddler.

<sup>2</sup> The formulas Zukofsky came up with are indicated in his working notebook (HRC 4.8) and for more details see the annotations to “A”-20 on the Z-site.

<sup>3</sup> In a reading of “A”-20 he made for Hugh Kenner in 1975, Zukofsky added a few remarks that unfortunately are not clear, but if I understand them correctly he states the Paul actually dictated this poem extempore as a demonstration of how easy it was to compose poetry, presumably in contrast to the demands of composing or playing music.

<sup>4</sup> Recordings available at PennSound <<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Zukofsky.php>>, dated 16 Oct. 1972 and 13 Dec. 1975.

is Zukofsky's translation into something analogous to the kind of music in which his son was becoming interested.

"A"-13 introduces the theme of the son growing up and asserting his independence, which will recur in most of the other longer movements of the 1960s, and by "A"-18 he has definitely left home and is missed. The dissonance of the first half of "A"-20 might be read as hinting at a tension in, from Paul's perspective, the somewhat overly close family unit Zukofsky celebrates throughout his writings after World War II. In this sense it contrasts with the earlier song whose main image is thickly growing ivy and conveys an idyllic pastoral scene—an image that suits as an ideal of poetry, of human community or family, and generally of an unfallen state. In other words, it offers an image of innocence and childhood, which has now necessarily been left behind for more adult and discordant experiences and art. The rudimentary contrast between the two halves can be allegorized in any number of directions relevant to the concerns of "A": passing time, the family, music, poetry and the historical development of both the latter. The leitmotif of Zukofsky's relationship with the younger generation recurs throughout the 1960s movements, most particularly in "A"-13, "A"-18 and -19, during a period in which not only his own son becomes a grown up but also Zukofsky is receiving a good deal of attention and requests from younger poets, about which he had ambiguous feelings. This is not the place to pursue these matters, except to suggest that the dissonance of the first half of "A"-20—a dissonance measured by its contrast with the latter half—represents mixed feelings on Zukofsky's part, a music he perhaps cannot altogether comfortably hear, but which nevertheless he accepts as a necessary direction for the young. As such, it gestures at that inevitable disturbance of the aesthetics of the new, which will always go further or elsewhere than can oneself.<sup>5</sup> However, one might note that serial composition was not altogether absent from Zukofsky's own work, since there are at least two well-known examples: "Songs of Degrees" 1 and 2 (CSP 145-146) and "Julia's Wild" in *Bottom* (393).

In a sense "A"-20 might be seen as anticipating on a miniature scale "A"-24 in that it is assembled out of Paul's works and suggests a summary of his compositions up to that point in time. The titles taken as a whole suggest something of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* implicating not only a curious assortment of instruments but dance and poetry as well. "A"-20 seems to be related to the variety of in-family works that Zukofsky encouraged. Besides the better known examples—"A"-24 itself, as well as the collaboration with Celia on *Catullus* and the inclusion of her *Pericles* score as volume 2 of *Bottom*—there are quite a few other examples during the decade of the 1960s. These would include Celia's musical settings to various of Louis' short poems eventually gathered together in *Autobiography* and which appear to have begun as Christmas presents rather like Zukofsky's valentine poems that he regularly wrote for Celia. There are also several examples of "musical" presentations of portions of "A" that appear to have been mainly the work of Celia.<sup>6</sup> Paul too was involved in such family projects,

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<sup>5</sup> Judging from his specific references to music, Zukofsky's musical ear was more traditional than the "music" of his poetry. Zukofsky's references to new (say, post-Schoenberg) music are rare and tend to be ambiguous if not skeptical. There are a few references to John Cage, which are a direct result of Paul's interests: see "A"-14.348.1-3 and 349.13-14, *Little* (CF 160), also *Prep+* 234. In the remarks mentioned in note 3, Zukofsky makes explicit the relationship between the first half of "A"-20 and the kind of experimental music with which Paul was becoming involved.

<sup>6</sup> "A" *Libretto* (privately mimeographed, 1965), a 21 page arrangement of excerpts from "A", and "'A' Cantata 13 v" published in *The Journal of Creative Behavior* (Poetry Supplement) 1.3 (July 1967): 20-21, which arranges a segment of the fifth partita of "A"-13 into alternating voices of "he" and "she."

most prominently in suggesting the use of Händel's "Harpsichord Pieces" for "A"-24, but also the composition titled "Variants" in "A"-20 was composed or at least used as a musical setting for Zukofsky's "Songs of Degrees" 1 & 2 and published in *Kulchur*.<sup>7</sup> The point is simply that "A"-20 participates in this in-family activity, which Zukofsky always insisted was necessarily central to the tenor of his own work—the immediate routine and emotional context out of which he or anyone composes and which infuses everything he writes. But this family context is simply the most immediately at hand permutation of the community implied in any writing or music. As such "A"-20 reminds us of the performative aspect of any cultural activity and its acting out with others. "A"-20 is explicitly a performative work, since the first half repetitions hardly have much interest or sense unless sounded out. The specific material being performed of course indicates its quite personal enactment of affection and love, but this is not fundamentally different from what is implied in any cultural activity.

A small irregularity worth noting is the odd intrusion of "An" in the first tone row, set off in the left margin. This of course is the requisite "an" that "A"-14 announced would begin all further movements of "A" (315), but in this case because the order of the first row is pre-determined, there is no opportunity, so to speak, to slip in the "an" until the second item. This simply indicates that while Zukofsky will establish rules of procedure, he is perfectly willing to adapt them to circumstances. In this case, the circumstances were collaborative since the original row was put together by Celia, and this is indicated by putting it in italics, a standard means of indicating a quotation in "A". Why there is a space interpolated into the row between titles 8 and 9, I cannot guess.

Since Zukofsky already had "A"-20 when he composed "A"-18 and -19, he devises clear links between them. The link with "A"-19 is obvious enough since a major portion is taken up with a violin competition in which Paul participated at age 20 and it concludes with mention of nine anticipating twenty, the ages represented and contrasted in the two parts of "A"-20. In "A"-18 the connections are somewhat more buried in the detail, like everything else in that movement, but there is included a phrase from the poem written by the nine-year-old Paul quoted in "A"-20 (396), as well as mention of the longing of innocence at nine (406). These are simply indicators that the movements can be read together and the kind of links that Zukofsky always tended to slip in, yet they do not amount to what we would usually think of as demanding some kind of sequential or group reading, as the individual integrity of the movements remains predominate. However, if we consider these preceding two movements (which were more or less written simultaneously) in relation to "A"-20, we can identify an expansion of the Paul motif. "A"-18 is the darkest of the later movements, overshadowed by the Vietnam War, but on a more personal level the darkened mood relates to Paul's detaching himself from the family as he pursues a more independent life and career. This manifests itself in a recurrent play on fractions of 3 and various other indications of his absence. "A"-19 will turn this around. Here we see Paul at twenty (or at least within a few weeks of his birthday at the time of the Paganini competition) involved in his career and making his music. The Mallarmé materials in "A"-19 are also Paul related since it is mentioned that he gave Zukofsky the copy of *Le Livre de Mallarmé* ("A" 421-422) out of which a significant portion of the movement is worked. For Zukofsky this working with or out of other texts, of making practical use of a gift is an enactment of friendship or love, of entwining with others. With respect to Paul, we can say that Zukofsky is with "A"-19 reworking and reconfiguring his relationship as father (a prominent topic in "A"-18), learning

<sup>7</sup> *Kulchur* 8 (1962): 31-39. A similar instance was an elaborate small press chapbook, *Catullus Fragmenta* (London: Turrent Books, 1969)—a single page of Celia and Louis' renditions of Catullus' surviving fragments accompanied by five pages of Paul's music.

to be with Paul in the composition of the poem when he can no longer so often be with him in person.

20 Oct. 2014