

Cantat Ergo Sumus

It Sings Therefore We Are



Paul Lodge showcases his recent project with Oxford band **Flights of Helios**, which marries his interests in philosophy and music.

I started writing and performing songs when I was in secondary school, with the lyrics written by my younger brother Richard. This continued into our time as undergraduates when we were contemporaries at Oxford. However, after moving to New Jersey in 1992 to study for my PhD at Rutgers University, I found myself without a lyricist and it was during this time that *Cantat Ergo Sumus* was born.

The idea of philosophy entered my consciousness as a teenager primarily through references that I came across in popular culture. I was raised on reruns of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* with

its philosophers' football match and philosophers' song, and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, at the centre of whose plot is the claim that 42 is the answer to "the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything." But perhaps more than anything it was the allusion to philosophical ideas in music that peaked my interest. I spent hours listening to existentially laden concept albums such as Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* and Genesis's *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*; and I found even more explicit connections with philosophy in songs like 'Close To The Edge' by Yes, which is inspired by Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, and 'I Dreamed I Saw Saint Augustine' by Bob Dylan.

I don't remember the precise point at which I decided to mimic this. A song that I wrote in 1993 had an awkward reference to reading Heidegger in Canada. But in early 1994 I found myself turning to the idea of taking the words of philosophers themselves and setting them to music. Three of the songs that make up *Cantat Ergo Sumus* come from that time. 'Small Country' is a somewhat loose rendition of the penultimate poem from the *Daodejing*, and 'Foolishness' and 'Brahma' are settings of poems by the medieval Catalan philosopher Ramon Llull and the 19th Century American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson respectively.

On leaving Rutgers I took up a position at Tulane University in New Orleans. Ironically, however, I didn't perform any music at all during the five years I lived there; and it wasn't until 2006, three years after I had returned to Oxford, that I began writing again. However it was different project altogether that led me to expand the three philosophical songs I already had into *Cantat Ergo Sumus*. Again, with brother Richard as the lyricist, I wrote a set of songs each inspired by one Shakespeare's plays, which

became collectively known as *Shakespeare in the Alley*. In 2019 I performed some of these at The Old Fire Station in Oxford at an event which also featured music from *The Food of Love Project*, an album of songs by various artists from Shakespeare's plays or written around that time. One of the bands on the bill was the Oxford Psychedelic-drone band **Flights of Helios**, and after the gig I got talking to their bass player Phil Hanaway-Oakley. I mentioned my philosophy songs, which had expanded from three to eight with the addition of two poems by Margaret Cavendish ('Of Shadow and Eccho' and 'The Island'); a setting of 'Zarathustra's Roundelay' from Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*; a reworking of an antiphon composed by Hildegard von Bingen ('Redness of Blood'); and a song based on the ninth of Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' ('New Angel'), which was written using an electronic version of the cut-up technique pioneered by Dadaists in the 1920s and put to great effect by David Bowie and Thom Yorke. Phil was intrigued and mentioned the possibility of collaboration.





Paul Lodge and Flights of Helios performing at The Old Fire Station, Oxford

With the idea hatched, I turned to **TORCH** (The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities) and successfully applied for a Theatre Seed Fund Grant, which are awarded to academics who connect up their research with performance and an external partner. It was at this point that the name *Cantat Ergo Sumus* came into existence. I had toyed with *Canto Ergo Sum* as a straight play on Descartes, and then *Cantamus Ergo Sumus* to reflect the collaborative element. But, ultimately, I went for the impersonal ‘cantat’. Here I took the lead from Heidegger and his attempts to capture the way in which our sense of existing in a world with other beings should be taken to emerge as one aspect of a more fundamental impersonal ‘worlding’. My own aim was to capture the mysterious sense of the songs coming from nowhere and no-one and bringing us to be as performers and listeners.

The money from the grant was initially designated to provide the funds to perform again at The Old Fire Station as well as reaching out to other venues. We intended to use the performances to hone our collaborative arrangements and then use the ticket money to contribute toward producing an album and podcasts that would include

short introductions to the philosophers and their ideas along with videos of the songs.

All these plans were moving along happily in the Autumn of 2019. The Old Fire Station was booked for May 2020 and we were exploring other venue options as we moved into the New Year. Everyone, of course, knows what happened next. As a result of Covid all live music had to be cancelled and it was not even possible to practice. However, there were positive sides. With performance on hold, we switched to recording. And without the constraints of performance, we found ourselves developing quite different arrangements of the music and were able to bring in the talents of additional musicians. Progress was still slow, with each artist recording parts from the comfort of their own homes whilst Phil served as producer and engineer and fell down numerous rabbit holes during long nights in the shed at the end of his garden.

Along the way, the project also led me to into a friendship with **Grzegorz Kwiatowski**, poet and lead singer with the Polish post-rock band Trupa Trupa, which led in turn to another *Cantat Ergo Sumus* event sponsored by TORCH. During the lockdown

all of the conferences, and lectures by external speakers that are the lifeblood of research went online. Grzegorz and I took advantage of this to organize a discussion of the relation between philosophy and music with legendary rock journalists David Fricke (one time editor at Rolling Stone Magazine), and Sylvie Simmons (also famous for her biography of Leonard Cohen), and BBC Radio 6 DJ Gideon Coe. And it was at this event that the first of the *Cantat* recordings, ‘Redness of Blood’, had its public debut. The discussion can be viewed [here](#).

As I write, ‘Redness of Blood’ and a second song, ‘Shadow and Echo’, have received airplay on **BBC Introducing Oxfordshire** and can be downloaded from **Bandcamp**. I have also presented both of the songs at a virtual conference ‘New Voices’ which was held under that auspices of the research centre History of Women Philosophers and Scientists in Paderborn, Germany. We are close to releasing an EP featuring two more songs (‘Small Country’ and ‘Foolishness’), and the remaining songs from the project are reasonably close to completion. And, whilst rehearsals came in fits and starts as various people succumbed to the virus, we were finally able to make good on our twice postponed gig at The Old Fire Station in February 2022. What comes next is a little unclear. We aim to roll out the other components of the project that was initially funded by TORCH. But the broader aim of using music to get into people’s heads and lure them into finding more about philosophy remains. And, of course, the best way to achieve that will be through global rock star status!

Paul Lodge
Professor of Philosophy
Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy, Mansfield College

For more on *Cantat Ergo Sumus* and Paul’s other musical interests, see paul lodge.com/music

I had toyed with Canto Ergo Sum as a straight play on Descartes, and then Cantamus Ergo Sumus to reflect the collaborative element. But, ultimately, I went for the impersonal ‘cantat’.

