

Comedy in Song



1. The Comic Vision

September 17, 2025

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DAYS OF LAUGHTER / NIGHTS OF ENCHANTMENT. The two hours of this introductory class offer an overview of the course to follow, exploring the many kinds of Comedy found on the musical stage.

The first hour, illustrated mainly with non-classical music, looks at the most obvious product of Comedy—laughter—and the many ways of provoking it: through clever words, clever music, character, or situation.

In the second hour we turn to four operas with scenes that take place at night and end in a wedding. In these, rather than laughter, the keys are romance, enchantment, make-believe, and a few moments of truth so acute that they almost hurt. *rb.*

A. Species of Comedy

We look again at a number featured in last semester's course from *Anything Goes* to analyze the different factors that make it funny.

Porter: *Anything Goes* (1934), "Friendship" (London 2021; Sutton Foster, *Reno*; Robert Lindsay, *Moonface*; Kathleen Marshall, *dir*)

B. Clever Words

More examples from Cole Porter, Broadway wordsmith *extraordinaire*, plus a song by Tom Lehrer.

Porter: *Anything Goes*, "You're the top" (sung by the composer)

Porter: *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), "Brush up your Shakespeare" (film 1953, with James Whitmore and Keenan Wynn)

Lehrer: *The Elements* (live in Copenhagen, 1967)

C. Clever Music

For the most part, we expect music to more or less keep pace with the dramatic action. But isn't it funny when it doesn't?

Loewe: *My Fair Lady* (1956), Ascot Gavotte (film 1964; George Cukor, *director*; Cecil Beaton, *costumes*)

Loesser: *Guys and Dolls* (1950), Fugue for Tinhorns (film 1955, with Stubby Kaye, Danny Drayton, and Johnny Silver)

Rossini: *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1816), excerpt from Act II finale (Madrid 2005, further details below)

D. Situation Comedy

Gioacchino Rossini was the unquestioned master of situation comedy in opera. Figaro, the title character in *The Barber of Seville*, helps the young Count Almaviva woo the lovely Rosina from under the nose of her guardian Doctor Bartolo, by smuggling him into the house first as a drunken soldier (see previous clip), then as the mild-mannered pupil of her music teacher Don Basilio. But then Basilio himself appears—

Rossini: *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1816), Act III quintet (Madrid 2005; Maria Bayo, *Rosina*; Juan Diego Florez, *Count*; Pietro Spagnoli, *Figaro*; Bruno Pratico, *Bartolo*; Ruggiero Raimondi, *Basilio*)

E. Nights of Enchantment

Beaumarchais wrote *The Marriage of Figaro* as a sequel to his *Barber of Seville*, showing what happens when the bloom wears off the honeymoon of Rosina and Almaviva. Figaro is now the Count's valet and is about to marry Susanna, the Countess's maid. But the Count has designs on her himself. Act IV of Mozart's opera shows the results of a plot to put things right, concocted by the women under the noses of the two men, and played out in a moonlit garden.

Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), aria and ending (London 2006; Miah Persson, *Susanna*; Dorothea Röschmann, *Countess*; Gerald Finley, *Count*; Erwin Schrott, *Figaro*; David McVicar, *director*)

The second act of Janacek's *Cunning Little Vixen* ends with the Vixen's wedding, celebrated by the other animals in a joyous frenzy.

Janacek: *The Cunning Little Vixen* (1923), Act II finale (Glyndebourne 2013; Melly Still, *director*; Vladimir Jurowski, *conductor*)

Like its Shakespeare original, Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream* splits its time between the worlds of the fairies, aristocrats, and ordinary folk. The three come together in the finale, where the workmen put on a play for the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, and Oberon and Tytania enter at night to bless the beds of the three couples.

Britten: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), the death of Thisbe (Royal Swedish Opera 2024; Michael Axelsson, *Thisbe*)

Britten: *Midsummer Night's Dream*, end (Glyndebourne 1981; James Bowman, *Oberon*; Ileana Cotrubas, *Tytania*; Damien Nash, *Puck*)

Verdi's final opera and only mature comedy, *Falstaff*, ends with a midnight celebration with the people of Windsor dressed as goblins and sprites, culminating in a giant fugue: *All the world's a comedy!*

Verdi: *Falstaff* (1893), "Sul fil d'un soffio etesio" (London 1982; Barbara Hendriks, Nannetta; Carlo Maria Giulini, *conductor*)

Verdi: *Falstaff* (1893), finale (Met 2013; Ambrogio Maestri, *Falstaff*; Robert Carsen, *director*)

Pierre-Augustin Caron de **Beaumarchais** (1732–99, *French playwright*), Arrigo **Boïto** (1842–1918, *Italian librettist and composer*), Benjamin **Britten** (1913–76, *English composer*), Leos **Janacek** (1854–1928, *Czech composer*), Tom **Lehrer** (1928–2025, *American singer-songwriter*), Alan Jay **Lerner** (1918–86, *American lyricist*), Frank **Loesser** (1910–69, *American composer*), Frederick **Loewe** (1901–88, *American composer*), Wolfgang Amadeus **Mozart** (1756–91, *Austrian composer*), Cole **Porter** (1891–1964, *American lyricist and composer*), Gioacchino **Rossini** (1792–1868, *Italian composer*), William **Shakespeare** (1564–1616, *English playwright*), Giuseppe **Verdi** (1813–1901, *Italian composer*)

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