

5 : Love is For Ever

A. Marriage Vows

1. Class title 1 (music room at Tribschen)
2. Class title 1b (the above, with Kate Taylor superimposed)

I admit the image on the website had very little to do with the class that has actually taken shape. When I started out, I was thinking very much of classical instrumental music, but the class has ended up being mostly about verse and song, with an unusual emphasis on pop.

3. Van Dyck: *Family Portrait* (1621, St. Petersburg)

Let's try again. The image shows **Anthony Van Dyck** (1599–1641) with his wife and young son. As this class is all about family relationships that last, I shall be using variants of this painting to introduce each of its five sections, as summarized on the slide. Each will be associated with a popular song from our own time. Everybody in the first hour will be alive, the second hour will go into a different kind of lasting love: one that endures beyond death. I hope to make it consoling, though, it not actually uplifting.

4. Section title A ("Marry me" by Train)
5. Schumann: *Frauenliebe und Leben*, title

That was "Marry me" by the trio **Train**. I don't especially like the words of the song, which seem sentimental and simplistic, but I kinda like the tune and very much like the video, especially the opening with all those presumably-real couples, diverse in age and background, talking about their love. Until quite recently, most songs about marriage were written by men, and thus represent masculine wish-fulfilment rather than the genuine perspective of a woman. This can certainly be said of the most famous classical cycle of such songs, *Frauenliebe und Leben* ("Woman's Life and Love," 1840) by **Robert Schumann** (1810–56). Schumann's wife, the piano virtuoso **Clara Wieck**, was no doormat, but the wife sketched in by the poet **Adelbert von Chamisso** (1781–1838) sees her function as worshipping and serving her impossible fine husband, and bearing children that look just like him. But Schumann's music is so passionate, so deeply felt, that very little of that matters. Besides, it is one of the very few song-cycles written from a woman's perspective. The eight songs touch on just about every topic in this class, from marriage to childbirth to widowhood. But I have to choose, so I'll play the last song after the break, and give you the first and fourth now. They represent the woman's reaction to first seeing her future husband, and her joy when he puts his ring on her finger. The singer is **Angelika Kirchschrager**, with **Melvyn Tan** on the piano.

6. Schumann: *Frauenliebe und Leben*, songs 1 and 4
7. Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti

As far as love *poetry* is concerned, there is a huge selection. I might have gone back to John Donne, for instance. But instead I have chosen a contemporary of his, **Anne Bradstreet** (1612–72), often referred to as the first poet in America. As a Puritan (the picture is either an actress in costume or AI), there is none of the sense of her writing while still lying beside her partner in bed; she has probably been up for hours, milking the cows and churning the butter. But there is no doubt about her devotion to her husband. I will follow it up with two 19th-century poems by women, both very well known. **Elizabeth Barrett Browning** (1806–61) published her love poems until the fiction of translation: *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, but the emotions are surely her own. **Christina Rossetti** (1830–94) never married, though she had at least one long engagement and at least two other proposals. Perhaps we can discuss what her poem *A Birthday* is about. The readers are **Helen Mirren**, **Judi Dench**, and **James Earl Jones**.

8. Anne Bradstreet: *To My Dear and Loving Husband* (Helen Mirren)

9. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: *Sonnets From the Portuguese*, 43 (Judi Dench)

10. Christina Rossetti: *A Birthday* (James Earl Jones)

11. Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti (repeat)

Any comments on any of these? In particular, is the Rossetti a love song? I would say yes, but not to a specific lover. To Love itself, rather, or perhaps to God; Christina Rossetti was very religious; incompatibility of faith was the main reason her other affections did not work out.

12. Van Dyck: *Family Portrait* (repeat)

Let's go back to that **Van Dyck** portrait with which I began. A loving husband and wife, and the product of their love: is this not a kind of love song in paint? Maybe, we cannot discount that. But I would say it is equally likely to be *dynastic*: here I am, obviously prosperous, with a wife of similar stature and a child who will carry things on after we are dead. Van Dyck's teacher, **Peter Paul Rubens** (1577–1640) painted a number of similar portraits of his second wife, **Hélène Fourment**. I'll show them one by one: let's ask the same question about each.

13. Rubens: Three portraits of Hélène Fourment (gradual reveal)

What did you think? The third one is obviously more intimate—but is this because it remains a sketch? What if it had been finished to the same degree as the others? Rubens was wealthy, but I don't suppose he lived in a house with columned porticoes; this was just a common setting for portraits (which he and Van Dyck indeed helped establish); but it does suggest the intention of public display. [Rubens' first wife, incidentally, **Isabella Brandt**, died at the age of 35; I'll show his portraits of her after the break.]

14. The Wagners at Tribschen

All the pictures in that last group involved the birth of a child. The rather enigmatic photo I used for my title shows the music room at **Tribschen**, Lake Lucerne, where **Richard Wagner** (1813–83) lived after his marriage to his second wife, **Franz Liszt's** daughter **Cosima**, and where the couple's son **Siegfried** was born. Shortly after the birth in 1870, Wagner arranged for a group of musicians to play a 20-minute chamber piece he had written, the *Siegfried Idyll*. They played it outside her bedroom on Christmas Day, Cosima's birthday. It was originally scored for 13 musicians, one to a part, but the work comes over

more clearly with added strings, so that is what I have chosen for our brief excerpt. It is played by the Dutch Radio Philharmonic under **Karina Canellakis**. Wagner later incorporated most of the music into the love scene of his opera *Siegfried*.

15. Wagner: *Siegfried Idyll*, excerpt

B. Parenthood

16. Section title B (Lennon: "Beautiful Boy")

That of course was **John Lennon** (1940–80), singing about **Sean**, his son with **Yoko Ono**, born in 1975. Alas, he was not able to see him come of age, as he was shot when Sean was five. We have already touched on a number of couples whose union included having children—the Rubenses, Van Dycks, and Wagners—but I want to use this short section to put parenthood under a closer lens.

17. Margaret Wise Brown with *The Runaway Bunny*

I know of no book that speaks of motherly devotion so persuasively as *The Runaway Bunny*, published in 1942 by **Margaret Wise Brown** (1910–52). The illustrations, which are equally iconic, are by **Clement Hurd**. Here it is read aloud; I can't find the name of the reader.

18. Margaret Wise Brown: *The Runaway Bunny*

19. Joe Mills: *How You Know*

Children of course grow up, and as they do, the parent's role as the purveyor of sage advice becomes a lot more complicated. Of the dozen or so poems about parenting that I read through in preparing this class, none struck me as much as this: *How You Know*, by **Joe Mills** (bdnk), answering a question from his daughter, who I assume is a young teen. It is more prose than verse, but appropriately I think, for what strikes me about it is not its construction but its truth. I'll read it myself.

20. Giuseppe Verdi with a scene from *Rigoletto* (1851)

Sometimes a parent can become too controlling, even obsessive, in trying to protect a teenage daughter. This is the case with the title character of *Rigoletto* (1851), the title character of the opera by **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901). As court jester and political catspaw to the Duke of Mantua, he has made many enemies. A widower, he has a young daughter, **Gilda**, whom he tries to keep hidden behind the high walls of his house, for fear that his enemies at court will try to abduct her. Which is exactly what happens. Before it does, however, Rigoletto sings a lovely aria, "Ah veglia, O donna, questa fior," asking Gilda's nurse to look after her. Gilda joins in, and it becomes a duet. This is an old performance from the Met featuring **Cornell MacNeil** and **Ileana Cotrubas**. I have cut out about a minute in the middle.

21. Verdi: *Rigoletto*, "Ah veglia, O donna, questa fior"

C. Coming Through

22. Section title C (Cohen: “Dance Me to the End of Love”)

23. — text of the above

Those were just two verses of “Dance Me to the End of Love” by **Leonard Cohen** (1934–2016); the full text is on the screen. Apparently, he was thinking of Holocaust survivors, but the song could work for any couple who have sustained a long marriage through thick and thin. And that’s how I hope to end this hour, with a small handful of works featuring marriages that have made it past the early stages and come through.

24. Shakespeare: *Sonnet LXXIII*

The classic poem about love enduring into old age is surely Sonnet LXXIII, “That time of year thou may’st in me behold,” by **William Shakespeare** (1564–1616). Here it is, read as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s COVID project, by **Richard Clews**.

25. Sonnet reading by Richard Clews

26. Limón: *Love Poem with Apologies for My Appearance*

Of course, artworks about marriage need not take their subjects through to old age. There is also that middle stage, marked by casual dress and comfortable habits. This is what I think **Ada Limón** (1976–) was thinking about with *Love Poem with Apologies for My Appearance*. It is another piece that is more prose than poetry, but she has all the right credentialed, being the first Latino/a poet to be appointed **Poet Laureate** of the United States, an honor she held between 2022 and 2025. I am not sure who the reader is, but I like her tone well enough to forgive a few small changes to the text.

27. Limón: *Love Poem with Apologies for My Appearance*

28. Pierre Bonnard: *Marthe in the Bathtub* (1946, Carnegie, Pittsburgh)

When I think of depictions of longstanding domestic intimacy in art, I immediately go to **Pierre Bonnard** (1867–1947) whose wife **Marthe** apparently suffered from a skin condition that required her to spend hours in the bathtub. Her husband painted over 300 paintings of her in the bath, mostly towards the end of her life (and his). They are intimate, but not especially erotic. The bathroom served much the same purpose for him as **Monet’s** *Haystacks* or *Rouen Cathedral*, a framework into which he could pour his evolving ideas about life and color. But although not intended so, it is hard not to see such transcendent radiance as its own kind of love-song.

29. Elgar/Ashton: *Enigma Variations*, title

Sir Edward Elgar (1857–1934) subtitled his *Enigma Variations* (1899). “To My Friends Pictured Within.” We are not talking about either new love or old age here, but a series of affectionate portraits built on long familiarity and friendship. When **Sir Frederick Ashton** (1904–88) made a ballet of it in 1968, he imagined all the friends visiting Elgar’s home in Worcestershire. The center of it, the famous *Nimrod*

Variation, is an exchange between **Elgar**, his best friend **AE Jaeger**, and **Elgar's wife**. It is as fine a portrayal of the close bonds of friendship and marriage that I know.

30. Elgar/Ashton: *Enigma Variations*, Nimrod

31. Class title 2 (Van Dyck group with sunburst)

D. Death in the Family

32. Section title D (Taylor Swift, "Bigger than the Sky")

That was **Taylor Swift** (1989–) once again, singing about some personal loss. I chose the song because although there may be a specific story behind it, it is not clear what age of person she is referring to. After trying in vain to slice this closing section into segments such as loss-of-a-child, loss-of-a-parent, and loss-of-a-partner, I have decided to lump all kinds of loss together.

33. Mahler, Rückert, and the *Kindertotenlieder*

I had hoped to have made this section uplifting rather than depressing, but while I have passed over some possible selections because their unremitted gloom, I realize that the process of dealing with grief demands an honest acceptance of loss, and the feelings of despair or anger that come with it, before any kind of reconciliation is possible. So in selecting the song to play from what is surely the classic work about the death of children, the *Kindertotenlieder* cycle (1904) by **Gustav Mahler** (1860–1911), I have chosen the one that most clearly expresses the double mood, the final song. We are to imagine that the children have been taken out in bad weather for some reason that their mother cannot argue against, but have caught cold and later died. I am playing it in a chamber arrangement by **Andreas Tarkmann**, because it puts the contrast of emotions into relief; the singer is **Sara Gouzy**. We'll talk more afterwards.

34. Mahler: *Kindertotenlieder*, "In diesem Wetter"

35. — text of the above

What did you think? The problem with songs like this is that any transfiguration at the end is likely to sound sentimental. I don't think this does—but in any case, the switch to the major key after 20 minutes of music would have a different effect from the same switch after only 4 minutes. Mahler was not writing from personal experience; the texts come from a group of 428 poems, at that time unpublished, written privately by **Friedrich Rückert** (1788–1866) as he struggled to come to terms with the death of two of his own children from scarlet fever. The Mahlers had not yet lost a child, but the composer was tempting fate; three years later their 4-year-old daughter died, also of scarlet fever.

36. Mary Oliver

Although I have examples of both parents that I might play, I have chosen to focus on the loss of one's mother. Unlike the premature death of children, the passing of one's parents is a normal fact of life. And of course we older people also recognize the inevitability of aging. I am going to play a song by **Ed**

Sheeran, bookended by two poems. The first, “When Death Comes” by **Mary Oliver** (1935–2019), is essentially her own obituary, as she would like it to read. I find its positive attitude a model of what I would like to say about myself as I approach the end.

37. Mary Oliver: “When Death Comes”

38. Ed Sheeran

The English singer-songwriter **Ed Sheeran** (1991–) seems too young and cheerful to be singing about grief, but he did write a very fine song about the death of his mother, *Supermarket Flowers*. I’ll put a video of this online that illustrates every image that Sheeran conjures up like photos in a family album—but I find it too literal and too busy. So instead I am playing one of him performing at an awards banquet; the over-the-top grandeur of the occasion contrasts with what it clearly deep personal feeling.

39. Ed Sheeran: “Supermarket Flowers”

40. Carol Ann Duffy

Scottish poet **Carol Ann Duffy** (1955–) was the Poet Laureate of Great Britain from 2009 to 2019; much of her writing is very personal. Her 2011 collection *The Bees* includes such a poem on the death of her mother. The connection with the Sheeran is that both start with the same image of the flowers by the deathbed. But what is special about the Duffy is that she works *backwards* from this moment. Tell me how you think the device works.

41. Carol Ann Duffy: “Premonitions”

42. Carol Ann Duffy (repeat)

Did that work for you? I found it a marvelous way of handling the transition from grief to acceptance.

43. James Taylor, versions of “You can close your eyes”

Let me throw in something here that strictly doesn’t belong, although it is very much about families. Sometime around 1970, **James Taylor** (1948–) wrote a lullaby called “You can close your eyes.” He wrote it during a six-month affair with **Joni Mitchell**, and they recorded it together as a duet a few years later. But the first person to issue a recording of the song was Taylor’s sister, **Kate Taylor**, who gives it a rather different sound. James Taylor went on to record it with a number of other artists, but the one that I got to know is from the Edinburgh Festival in July of this year, where he is joined by his son **Henry Taylor**. To me, this gave the piece an altogether different quality; I wonder if you hear it too.

44. James Taylor, versions of “You can close your eyes”

45. James Taylor, versions of “You can close your eyes” (repeat image)

Did you hear what I hear? The song, which began as a simply lullaby to a lover—albeit in a relationship that would soon break up—takes on a very different quality when sung by an elderly man with his young adult son. I hear it as an admission that he will soon be gone, but his son will have this song to remember him by, and sing as a kind of obituary.

46. Rubens: *The Honeysuckle Bower* (1609, Munich) and *Isabella Brandt* (1625–26, Uffizi)

The Taylor example was admittedly ambiguous: a love song, but not necessarily about death at all. But I want to end with three examples from different media that are not ambiguous at all. First, painting. Here are two portraits by **Rubens** of his first wife, **Isabella Brandt**. Would anyone care to compare them? The first, though intimate, is almost a document, like the Van Dyck portrait I have been using a lot. It celebrates the couple's marriage in 1609. Rubens has clearly done well for himself, and he wants everybody to know it. Even the fact that it is painted in a **honeysuckle bower** is symbolic, for honeysuckle is a sweet-scented vine that twines together and is difficult to separate. But alas, the couple *could* be separated, in this case by death. Isabella died of the plague in 1625; the portrait on the right is posthumous, as the artist tries to remember the partner he has lost.

47. Posthumous portraits, ancient and modern

It is not common, but there is a tradition in memorial portraiture in art. The two panels at the left are so-called **Fayum Portraits**, or naturalistic but idealized likenesses of the dead person placed above the face in the mummy case. The tradition was specific to Roman Egypt between the first century BCE and the first century CE. The one on the right, alas, is modern: somebody has given the artist an old photograph of, presumably, their parents to be painted up as a memorial.

48. Schumann: *Frauenliebe und Leben*, title (repeat)

49. Schumann: *Frauenliebe und Leben*, opening measure (repeat)

I started the class with two songs from **Schumann's** *Frauenliebe und Leben* cycle. Just as a reminder, this is how it starts; remember that music. The cycle continues with the wedding and the birth of their child, but then comes a blow: the husband dies and the young woman finds herself a widow. It is a bleak song, full of desolation and pain. But then, in a long piano postlude, Schumann does something extraordinary

50. Schumann: *Frauenliebe und Leben*, final song

Is this bitter irony, or sentimental tear-jerking? For me, the result is positive. I talked about the double mood in works about death. Like the Mahler song, this begins in despair but wins through to a kind of benediction.

51. Jonathan Larson, with poster for *RENT*

I have not seen *RENT* (1996), the hit musical by **Jonathan Larson** (1960–96), who died on the morning of its first preview. It is based on Puccini's *La bohème*, and I got quite enough of that in my other life! But I recently saw a clip of the ending, and I must say I was impressed. Puccini ends with the death (from consumption) of the main female character, Mimi, when her lover (of course the tenor) breaks down into helpless weeping. Done right, there is not a dry eye in the house. Larson has a similar ending, in which Mimi appears to die, but then he reverses this, having her revive, and end the musical in an affirmation of friendship. He places the emotional catharsis earlier in the act, with the death (from AIDS) and funeral of a secondary character, the drag queen **Angel**. At the funeral, several of his/her friends have spoken lines, but Angel's partner, the NYU professor **Collins**, sings a reprise of an earlier song,

“Cover you,” and the others join in. The song also contains the show’s title: “I think they meant it | When they said you can’t buy love | Now I know you can rent it”—“rent” being the outpouring of affection, even in situations that are intrinsically fragile and unlikely to last. I have chosen this scene to end with, in the hope that you will share my feeling of uplift, despite the tragedy.

52. Larson: *RENT*, funeral of Angel

53. Class title 3 (transformation of intermission slide)