Class 2 : Music and Time

A. Three Tenses

1. Class title 1 (Karelia)

Today we are going to talk about Music and Time. But I want to begin with distinguishing between the **three tenses of time**. This video may or may not make it clear.

2. Section title A ("The Three Tenses")
3. — still from the above, labeled

What do I mean by the three tenses, as applied to music? One meaning is obvious: the time in which a piece was writen: we listen to anything by **Tchaikovsky** and we are back in the Nineteenth Century; hearing **Mozart** takes us back to the Eighteenth; let's call this the **PAST** tense, represented in my video by the ticking clock. But there are a few pieces that deliberately evoke a time earlier than the one in which they were written; Tchaikovsky, for example, wrote a suite called *Mozartiana,* evoking the music of a century before; let's call this **PLUPERFECT**; I represented this in the video by the antique chime. The third tense, which I call **PRESENT**, is more difficult to explain; I represented it by the total cessation of sound. It decribes the sensation that when one is totally immersed in music, as a performer but occasionally as a listener, outside time simply stops; the only time that moves is that in the music itself. This is a hard one to show by example unless you are a musician, but I will try.

4. Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757)

I am going to play some performances of a *Sonata in E major* by **Domenico Scarlatti** (1685–1757). The first two clips will be short sections only, but I will play it complete before we are done. It was written for the harpsichord, but my first example is played on the piano and the third on the guitar; it is the same music in each case. Watch this short clip by the pianist **Lucas Debargue**; what period does this conjure up in your mind, and how much of this is created by the music itself, the filming, or the setting?

5. Scarlatti: *Sonata in E major* (A´ section), Lucas Debargue

What did you think? This was played on an antique piano, on the stage of a baroque theatre, in something like eighteenth-century stage lighting. I love the way the camera starts distant and comes forward, as I hear a similar fade-in effect in the music itself. Let me explain. I hear the music in four distinct sections: the merest **sketch** at the start; then a **transition**, coming into focus; then those **fanfares**, very much *present*, very much *now*; finally a **coda**, pulling back into a sort of memory of what we have heard. Let's listen again to it played on the harspichord by **Béatrice Martin**, with the score added for those that can read it.

6. Scarlatti: *Sonata in E major* (A section), Béatrice Martin
7. — still from the above, annotated

The titles I added to that video are entirely off the top of my head, but they do describe the curious feeling of distance the piece has always given me. You will see that I have used phrases that suggest where it is located in space: "somewhere else," "coming closer," "pulling back." But there is also the feeling of distance in time; even those fanfares at the climax seem to come from another era—and I don't hear it as Scarlatti's own, but something earlier. Of course these reactions are entirely personal; I'll play you examples later where the references to time are far less ambiguous.

8. Croatian guitarist Ana Vidovic (b.1980)

Listen for Scarlatti's effects of distance or time as I play a complere performance by Croatian guitarist **Ana Vidovic** (1980–); she is especially good at handling all those **echo effects**. Vidovic is a graduate of the Peabody Conservatory, though she had established an international career as a child prodigy long before she came to us. However, I have chosen her performance for quite a different reason. Look at the image created in the publicity photo here, then ask yourself: is it the same persona when she is playing?

9. Scarlatti: *Sonata in E major* (complete), Ana Vidovic
10. — still from the above

I went 10 seconds beyond the end there to make my point. What did you think of her body language? It is exactly the opposite of that press photograph, isn't it? There is absolutely no hint of flamboyance; it is just her alone with the music, which she conjures out of the guitar by some sort of spell. She is This course is about **Musical Escapes**, and most of it is about escaping outwards to somewhere else. But for the musician, there is a second kind of escape: **escaping inward**. I know no better way of demonstrating it than this video. Vidovic is like a medium, acting as a channel to some distant age. But for her, real time in the present that we measure on our watches and smarphones—that time has simply stopped.

11. Lang Lang & Yuja Wang

Meet two of the superstar pianists on the world stage today: **Lang Lang** (b.1982) and **Yuja Wang** (b.1987). Both are Chinese. Both went on to study at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia (where I also used to teach). Both occasionally play the *Turkish Rondo*—the finale to the *Sonata in A major* by **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91)—as concert encores. I'd like you to compare them in terms of what we were discussing with Vidovic. Here, first, is Lang Lang, playing it in a solo concert, more or less as Mozart wrote it, though insanely fast.

12. Mozart: *Turkish Rondo,* Lang Lang

And here is Yuja Wang, in a concert in Munich. She is not playing it straight, but in a much more difficult version by the Greek pianist **Arkady Volodos**; I think she has added a few bells and whistles of her own. After all, if an encore is intended to show off, why not show all you've got?

13. Mozart/Volodos: *Turkish Rondo,* Yuja Wang
14. Lang Lang & Yuja Wang (repeat)

What did you think? You would think that, with a piece designed for sheer flamboyance, Wang would behave more like a showman. But no, it is Lang Lang who plays to his audience, playing beautifully, but mugging almost every phrase. Yuja Wang, like Ana Vidovic, is totally caught up in what she is playing, and doesn't acknowledge the audience until after it is over.

15. Judi Dench

What about **Broadway**? This type of escape-inward is much rarer in a medium whose whole *raison-d'être* is to blast emotion across the footlights. But there are a few numbers that require the exact opposite—drawing the audience *to you* instead of going out to them—a kind of **escape-inwards in reverse**. And there are very few performers who can handle this. One such is **Judi Dench** (1934–), not a professional singer at all, but an actress of remarkable skill. Listen to her performance of "Send in the Clowns" from *A Little Night Music* (1973) by **Stephen Sondheim** (1930–2021). She is performing in one of London's largest venues, the cavernous Royal Albert Hall, but every person in that audience of 5,000 or so is right down there with her, in her lap. Of course the microphone helps—but what we are really watching is the extraordinary concentration of the performer. Your comments are welcome.

16. Sondheim: *A Little Night Music,* "Send in the Clowns" (Judi Dench)
17. Dench, Vidovic, and Wang

B. Two British Monarchs in Music

18. Section title B

The music there involved a time warp in itself. It is the British national anthem, "God save the King," dating from the Eighteenth Century at least, recomposed by virtuoso **Niccolò Paganini** (1782–1840), for a concert in London in 1829 attended by **William IV**. The two English Monarchs on the slide are of course **Elizabeth I** (reigned 1558–1603) and **George III** (reigned 1760–1820). I thought that by looking at the way later composers have represented these earlier monarchs, we might get into the subject of how a composer in one period can represent an earlier one.

19. All four composers

I have four works to play: two are from operas, one from a musical, and the other from a work that I can only describe as entirely its own thing. Listening to any of these involves a **double shift in time**: to the period of the composer, *and* to the historical period he is representing. First, two scenes about Queen Elizabeth and her favorite, **Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex**. In history, the queen appoints him to command the forces putting down a rebellion in Ireland but, having won the victory, he offers peace to one of the rebel leaders on his own initiative—a move that ultimately leads the Privy Council to condemn him to death by treason. Elizabeth delays signing the warrant, but ultimately does so, motivated—in both operas—by romantic jealousy. The two scenes I want us to sample are not strictly parallel. In *Roberto Devereux* by **Gaetano Donizetti** (1797–1848), he has already returned from Ireland,

but Elizabeth tells him that she will refuse to sign the death sentence if he returns her love. The singers are **Sondra Radvanovsky** and **Matthew Polenzani** (whom we heard in the Rossini *Stabat Mater* last week). In *Gloriana* by **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76), their scene comes earlier; Essex (**Tom Randle**) flatters the Queen (**Josephine Barstow**) with songs of love. The question I want to ask about both of them is: what means (if any) does each composer use to establish the earlier period?

20. Donizetti: *Roberto Devereux*, Elizabeth and Essex
21. Britten: *Gloriana,* Elizabeth and Essex
22. Composers (repeat, upper pair)

What did you hear? Both composers use the musical language of their own time. But Donizetti's characters sing in the same style as he would use for all his operas; Britten channels the lute music and vocal style of Elizabeth's own day. There is a double perspective with him; there is none with Donizetti.

23. Composers (repeat, lower pair)

Lin-Manuel Miranda (1980–) makes no attempt to create a time-warp for *Hamilton*; the whole thing is daring attempt to rework the later Eighteenth Century in the language of the early Twenty-First—a multi-racial cast performing in rap. Yet he does have a perspective shift in his portrayal of King George: the only major cast member not a person of color, the only one to get a traditional Broadway song, and the only one not to rap. Here is **Jonathan Groff**:

24. Miranda: *Hamilton,* "You'll be back"
25. Maxwelll Davies: *Eight Songs for a Mad King,* online menu

Eight Songs for a Mad King is a relatively early work in the career of **Sir Peter Maxwell Davies** (1934–2016). It was written in 1968, when he was one of a small group of British composers intent on pushing the bounds of music drama to their breaking-point, and beyond. He takes the mad King George III, and places him in the middle of a surreal nightmare. The instrumentalists are all supposed to be in bird cages; the percussionist has a whip with which he flogs the mad king, who is encased in a strait-jacket. Davies wrote it for the South Afican performer **Roy Hart**, who had studied extended vocal techniques giving him a four-octave range. Here it is performed by **Kelvin Thomas**. The musical language is not merely modern, but ultra-modern. Yet Davies and his librettist, **Randolph Stow**, intertwine it with references to the time of King George himself: some of the odder lines are actually sayings by the King. Although the music is generally dissonant, there are moments that return to the simple harmony of the Eighteenth Century. One such is the opening of the section I am going to play. Another is the quotation from the King's favorite work, Handel's *Messiah.* Here is how it opens, in a student recital with piano:

26. Handel: *Messiah,* "Comfort ye, my people"

You will hear that tune at least twice: once pretty straight, once played as a foxtrot—another time-shift, and one for which I have no logical explanation!

27. Maxwell Davies: *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, excerpt
28. Class title 2 (playing games with time)

C. Five Time Capsules

29. Section title C (5 time capsules)

Five images, all having to do with dances or processions or both, all fading into the sepia tones of the past. They relate to the five **Time Capsules** I am going to show you in this second hour, with the minimum explanation or discussion. All are complex works, involving more than one medium. All revisit some time in the past, mostly the earlier Twentieth Century. The first and last of these are longer segments; the items in the middle are shorter. I have shown parts of all but one of these in other classes, but you would have had to have followed me around to three different venue to have seen them all—and if you're that keen, you probably don't care!

30. Ashton: *Enigma Variations*, group portrait

We'll start with two ballets. While still a student, the designer **Julia Trevelyan Oman** (1930–2003) proposed to **Sir Frederick Ashton** (1904–88) the idea of a ballet based on the *Enigma Variations* (1899) by **Edward Elgar** (1857–1934); ten years later Ashton took it up. Elgar's score is subtitled "*To my friends pictured within*," and the concept was to bring them all together in the garden of an English country house. I'll play the opening and first three variations to give you some idea of the time-capsule element. The person you see first is Elgar himself; the variations feature Elgar's wife and two of his male friends, one about his age, the other much older. I'll then cut to the emotional center of the work, the "Nimrod" variation dedicated to Elgar's close friend **Alfred Jaeger**. Unlike the other variations, this one is not about some personality trait so much as an undisclosed private incident between the two men. Apparently Elgar was given to crippling fits of self-doubt, and Jaeger, who was his publisher as well as close friend and most honest critic, helped him over one of them by citing the example of Beethoven. What is most remarkable to me is that the number is hardly danced at all. It begins with a tentative gesture by Jaeger, who I think must be in love with the woman in the previous variation. Then Elgar comes in, and the two talk. The composer's wife joins them, and for a moment the piece becomes an actual *pas-de-trois*, reaching a climax with the music, but then just stops. It feels so utterly true, and a reminder that the deepest stories can sometimes be told with the simplest of means.

31. Ashton: *Enigma Variations* (1968), opening and *Nimrod* variation
32. Ravel, with Gause: *Hofball in Wien*

My other ballet, *La Valse* (1920) by **Maurice Ravel** (1875–1937) is interesting in that it evokes two different periods at the same time. The one explained in the score is the heyday of the Imperial Era in Vienna. Ravel's music is a kind of summary of all the Waltz stood for in the grand ballrooms of Europe. It is conjured out of the mists. The score make this explicit: *Through swirling clouds, couples of waltzers are faintly distinguished. The clouds disappear gradually; a huge ballroom is seen, peopled with walzing couples*. Sir Frederick Ashton treats this literally in his version:

33. Ravel: *La Valse* (Ashton), opening
34. Ravel and Diaghilev

Ravel had already written one ballet, *Daphnis and Chloe,* for impresario **Serge Diaghilev** (1872–1929). This was to have been another. But Diaghilev rejected it, perhaps because there was no story, perhaps because Ravel was pursuing another agenda. He had served as an ambulance driver in the First World War and the experience traumatized him. His paean to the Waltz also became a dance of death, especially as the music gets more and more discordant towards the end. Ashton simply brings back those rolling clouds; **Balanchine** brings in a Death figure who singles out one of the ballerinas. But I have been especially impressed by this version by Portuguese choreographer **Paulo Ribeiro** (1959–). In his version, there is no hint of any Viennese ballroom. But however you interpret his images and metaphors, there is no doubt of Ravel's subtext of the end of a world.

35. Ravel: *La Valse* (Ribeiro), end
36. Wilson, Russell, and *The Boy Friend*

My next time-warp clip is, frankly, only to provide variety. But again it is a double time-capsule. British composer **Sandy Wilson** (1924–2014) wrote *The Boy* Friend in 1953 as a tribute to musicals from the Twenties, such as *No, No, Nannette.* When director **Ken Russell** (1927–2011) filmed it for MGM in 1971, he in turn made it a tribute to MGM's **Busby Berkeley** movies of a similar period. I only have the trailer, but it is all we need to sample this two-fold time-capsule.

37. Wilson: *The Boy Friend,* trailer to the Ken Russell film
38. William Kentridge: scene from *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (2015)

The next one, *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (2015) is something I can't define. Its creator, South African artist **William Kentridge** (1955–) has directed several operas, including Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* at the Met. But this is on video, designed to be projected on eight screens lining three walls of a room in an art gallery. I caught it in Cape Town and was utterly mesmerized, remaining through three iterations of its 15-minute cycle. The makeshift set-up, the instability of the background, and the dirtiness of the sound-track are all deliberate; this is not meant to come over as a polished work of art. See what you think of the first four minutes or so?

39. Kentridge: *More Sweetly Play the Dance,* opening
40. — still from the above (repeat)

What do you think that was about? Like the Ravel, it seems to be a kind of *danse macabre*, I would say. It is obviously about the African identity, expressed through music and dance, the tragic history of the continent continuing into the present.

41. James Agee's Knoxville

Finally to my featured work today, slightly longer than the others, because it is complete. **James Agee** (1909–55), born in Knoxville, Tennessee, was only 5 when his father was killed in a car accident. His autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family*, which he began in 1948 but was left unfinished on his death in 1955, is partly an attempt to come to terms with that loss. It begins with a three-page prologue, entitled *Knoxville, Summer of 1915.* This was written separately from the rest in 1935, and published in 1938. Here is the first short paragraph, read by **Dean Rudoy**:

42. James Agee: *Knoxville, Summer of 1915,* opening (Dean Rudoy)

The composer **Samuel Barber** (1910–81) made his own selection from the text in 1958 to create a 15-minute work for soprano and orchestra entitled *Knoxville, Summer of 1915.* Here it is, sung by **Dawn Upshaw**, with **David Zinman** conducting. I hope it was helpful to duplicate the small titles up above. The images are not mine; I found the video on YouTube, ready-made. But they certainly work for me!

43. Barber: *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*. Dawn Upshaw, David Zinman.
44. Class title 3 (James Agee marker)