

Musical Escapes



2. Music and Time

November 4, 2025

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WE MAKE A MUSICAL ESCAPE IN TIME WHENEVER WE HEAR A PIECE BY AN EARLIER COMPOSER. It is only an unusual experience when the composer attempts to conjure up an earlier period still. Five examples of such temporal legerdemain will occupy the second hour of this class. Before that, we look at two British monarchs each depicted in dramatic works by two later composers, one of whom quotes from music of the time, while the other doesn't; how does this illuminate the dynamics of musical time-travel?

By talking of “musical time-travel” as listeners, we are assuming a journey back to some distant period. But the performer balances this against something else: a total concentration in which normal time simply stops—a journey into the *now*, or escape *from* time. Every musician knows this, but the ability to convey it to others is rare indeed.

The class will begin and end with featured works played in full: a Scarlatti sonata and Barber's *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*. rb.

A. Three Tenses

The three tenses of my title are PAST (the composer's own period), PLUPERFECT (an earlier period that he or she may evoke), and PRESENT (the ability to freeze everyday time as described above). The first half-hour attempts to define the concept and give some examples of the third of these: the performer's ability to stop the clock.

Scarlatti: *Sonata in E*, K.360, opening (Lucas Debargue, *piano*)

Scarlatti: *Sonata in E*, K.360, opening (Béatrice Martin, *harpsichord*)

Scarlatti: *Sonata in E*, K.360, complete (Ana Vidovic, *guitar*)

Mozart: *Turkish Rondo*, from **Sonata in A** (Lang Lang, *piano*)

Mozart/Volodos: *Turkish Rondo* (Yuja Wang, piano)

Sondheim: *A Little Night Music*, "Send in the Clowns" (BBC Proms, 2010; Judi Dench)

B. Two Monarchs, Four Composers

Earlier dramatic composers relied less on music and more on costume and setting to characterize the period about which they were writing. Later 20th-century ones, however, often juggled period references with the music of their own time. We look at two comparisons (Elizabeth I and George III) to discuss how this works.

Donizetti: *Roberto Devereux* (1830), Queen Elizabeth and Essex (Met 2016; Sondra Radvanovsky & Matthew Polenzani)

Britten: *Gloriana* (1953), Queen Elizabeth and Essex (film 1999; Josephine Barstow & Tom Randle)

Miranda: *Hamilton* (2016), "You'll be back" (Jonathan Groff)

Maxwell Davies: *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1968), sections 6 and 7 (Kelvin Thomas)

C. Five Time-Capsules

Two ballets, a movie trailer, a song with orchestra, and a museum piece that is completely *sui generis*—the final hour consists of five works that combine music with at least one other medium to create a time-capsule of some earlier period. The points of reference are all between about 1900 and 1928; the periods of composition span most of the 20th century. We are mostly done with discussing mechanics; the point now is to enjoy five remarkable pieces.

Elgar: *Enigma Variations* (1899), ballet by Frederick Ashton (1968): opening numbers and *Nimrod* (Royal Ballet)

Ravel: *La Valse* (1919), opening (Frederick Ashton, 1968), and ending (Paulo Ribeiro, 2012)

Wilson: *The Boy Friend* (1953), trailer of the 1971 Ken Russell film

Kentridge: *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (2015), opening

Barber: *Knoxville, Summer of 2015* (1958 setting of words by James Agee, 1935), complete (Dawn Upshaw, David Zinman)

James **Agee** (1909–55, American writer), Frederick **Ashton** (1904–88, British choreographer), Samuel **Barber** (1910–81, American composer), Benjamin **Britten** (1913–76, British composer), Serge **Diaghilev** (1872–1929, Russian impresario), Gaetano **Donizetti** (1797–1848, Italian composer), Edward **Elgar** (1857–1934, British composer), William **Kentridge** (1955–, South African artist and opera director), Peter **Maxwell Davies** (1934–2016, British composer), Lin-Manuel **Miranda** (1980–, American composer, lyricist, and performer), Wolfgang Amadeus **Mozart** (1756–91, Austrian composer), Niccolò **Paganini** (1782–1840, Italian composer), Maurice **Ravel** (1875–1937, French composer), Paulo **Ribeiro** (1959–, Portuguese choreographer), Ken **Russell** (1927–2011, British film director), Domenico **Scarlatti** (1685–1757, Italian composer), Stephen **Sondheim** (1930–2021, American composer), Sandy **Wilson** (1924–2014, British composer and lyricist)

The course website is www.brunyate.com/MusicalEscapes
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Want Still More?

Check out the above website a few hours after class. In addition to the clips listed here (or close substitutes), you will find a section of composers' tributes to their predecessors, and a film of a nostalgic British musical, *Salad Days*, that was the sound-track of my youth.