

Class 1: The Sound of Words

A. Possibilities

1. Section title A (Poetry/Music Spiral)

Poetry and music in an eternal spiral, inextricably linked. I am dividing this class into two sections: **Possibilities** and **History**. The History part consists of previews of the five remaining classes, showing different ways in which poetry and music have been linked over time. But in the Possibilities, I want to make a very simple point: **that poetry has music in itself**. I'll make this experiential, by playing you the opening sections of two poems. Since I want you to listen to them as **sound**, I have chosen things whose meaning you probably won't take in at first hearing: a snatch of **TS Eliot** and a poem by **Baudelaire** in French. So here is the opening of *Burnt Norton*, the first of the *Four Quartets* by **TS Eliot** (1888–1965): the first eight lines, read by **Alec Guinness**. I'll play it twice. Don't worry about the words at first; just listen to the sound of his voice. Then I'll add the text.

2. TS Eliot: *Four Quartets*, opening of *Burnt Norton*, read by Alec Guinness

So what did that do for you? Were you able to listen to the words as sound alone, without trying to parse them? Once you could see the words, did that enhance the sound or get in its way? I'll give you a slightly longer version of this excerpt in a moment, but first I want to consider what various other people have said about the interconnection between Poetry and Music—and incidentally Painting.

3. William Blake quote
4. Paul Valéry quote
5. Joan Miro quote
6. Leonardo da Vinci quote
7. — all of the above together

So here we have **William Blake** (1757–1827) calling **Poetry, Painting & Music the three Powers in man of conversing with Paradise, which the flood did not sweep away**. **Paul Valéry** (1871–1945) giving second place to his own art, calling Poetry **Music dragged down to the level of speech**. The Spanish painter **Joan Miró** (1893–1983) linking both Poetry and Music to Painting, saying **I try to apply colors like words that shape poems, like notes that shape music**. And **Leonardo da Vinci** (1452–1519) talking about both Poetry and Painting when he said **Painting is poetry that is seen rather than heard, and poetry is painting that is heard rather than seen** ["heard" or "felt"; the Italian word *sentito* means both.]

Might Leonardo as well have said Music rather than Poetry? Perhaps. But look at this lovely sonnet by **WH Auden** (1907–73). He says that Music is unique, an "absolute gift" independent of the real world:

8. WH Auden: "The Composer"

Let's now go back to the Eliot. Here the opening of *Burnt Norton* in a rather longer video that I found online by someone calling herself **Satty VerbArt**. She too is musical, though in a different key from Guinness. She adds **some actual music**, a piano piece that I cannot identify. And she adds a **sequence of visual images** with quite some skill. So watch and listen, and again tell me how you think each of the media works (or doesn't work) together.

9. TS Eliot: *Four Quartets*, opening of *Burnt Norton*, tribute video by Satty VerbArt

What did you think the music did there? To my mind, it was not strictly necessary, but it did enhance the **mood**. And what about the visual images? Personally I felt they helped the understanding, by being concrete but not *too* literal. Although this course is about Poetry and Music, the visual arts will inevitably come in as well, so let's think about them.

10. Diagram: Poetry, meaning, mood, and form

When I started to sketch this diagram, I was about to say that **Poetry comes from the confluence of Meaning and Mood**; the words mean something concrete, but they also have a sound; somehow the poet balances the actual with the abstract. But then thinking about the Eliot, I realized that poetry also has **Form**: the rhythms, the repetitions, the perceived shape—and form is pure music.

11. Courbet: *Charles Baudelaire*

I want to try the experiment of listening to Poetry as Music once more. This time, I am going to use a poem in French, the opening stanza of "Invitation to the Voyage" from *Les fleurs du Mal* (1857) by **Charles Baudelaire** (1821–67). I'll give you the words, just to have something on the screen, but I won't translate them yet. Again, I want you to listen rather than trying to work out what the words mean.

12. Baudelaire: "*L'invitation au voyage*." Opening, read by Dana Andreea Nigrim

The reader was **Dana Andreea Nigrim**. It sounds almost like a lullaby, doesn't it, whispered, suggestive. Here is the text, as translated by **William Aggeler**:

13. Baudelaire: "*L'invitation au voyage*." Opening, translated by William Aggeler

The painting was a portrait of the poet by his friend **Gustave Courbet** (1819–77). Another painter inspired by the poet was **Henri Matisse** (1869–1954), who in 1904 painted an evocation of Baudelaire's refrain line, "*Luxe, calme, et volupté*."

14. Matisse: *Luxe, calme, et volupté* (1904, Paris, Orsay)

It is a very famous line from a very famous poem. Not surprisingly, it has been set to music many times. Here is the same first stanza in the versions by **Henri Duparc** (1848–1933) as sung by the great French baritone, **Gérard Souzay**, and the popular singer **Léo Ferré** (1916–93). Let's compare them, asking two questions: Does the composer enhance the latent music of the poem or compete with it? And, in this particular case, how does he handle that refrain? [From time to time, incidentally, I will show you clips

with the printed music, because some people might appreciate it, but I do know that not all of you will be able to follow the score.]

15. Duparc: “L’invitation au voyage.” Gérard Souzay

16. Ferré: “L’invitation au voyage.” Léo Ferré

17. — the two composers above

B. History

18. Section title B (History)

19. Course/class menu

All that was a prologue, simply to make the point that, although I have called the course “Poetry in Music,” I might equally well have called it “The Music in Poetry.” The rest of this class, as I said, will be a brief preview of the remaining 5 classes, which deal with various ways in which poetry and music have interconnected over the last millennium; the organization is vaguely chronological, but only vaguely so.

20. Section title B: The Sacred in Text and Song (Gregorian chant MS)

The Sacred in Text and Song. Religion has been expressed in poetry from earliest times. Even the laws and statistics in the first books of the Hebrew Bible have a rhythm to them, and both the *Psalms* of David and *The Song of Solomon* are overtly poetic. Christian liturgy makes use of medieval poems such as the *Magnificat*, the *Song of Simeon*, and the *Dies Irae*. Music like the chant shown here grew out of the poetry, partly as a way of synchronizing and pacing communal devotions, partly as a way of making it audible in vast spaces—by which I mean both the literal space in an abbey or cathedral, and the interstellar space between earth and heaven. I’ll glance at **cantillation** in other religions briefly in next week’s class. For now, I want to play you two examples of the Gregorian Plainchant that developed during the 9th and 10th centuries, and continued through the Middle Ages. One is sung by men, much as the medieval monks might have done, the other is executed in concert by women (yes, nuns sang plainchant also). I’ll tell you more after we have heard them, but for now I want you to listen for two things: how many singers do you think we are hearing, and how many separate musical lines?

21. Etienne de Liège: *Deum verum*, performed by Psallentes

22. Trio Medieval: *A Worcester Lady mass*

23. — attributions of the above

What did you hear: how many singers, how many musical lines? The first was written by **Etienne de Liège** (850–920) around 900; the second comes from fragments preserved in Worcester Cathedral from around 1400. Both are intended for ritual use, though probably for special occasions. Both are chant, in that the speed and duration of notes is not measured. The earlier version is basically **monophonic**, or written for a single unaccompanied vocal line, though there are five singers in the group. There is a moment where two parts separate, but the lower one is simply singing the same notes in parallel, an

octave or fifth down. Most of the Worcester music, though, involves more than one voice, and was sung here by a trio; while it can still be used in a sacramental context, this is taking an important step towards music that can stand alone—as it is now doing. One more point. In most of what I shall play, poetry and music are linked by **rhythm**. But plainchant is the one musical form in which rhythm is almost irrelevant. Or rather, its rhythm is that of the human breath; it has nothing to do with the ticking of a clock.

24. Section title C: Songs of the People (MS of “Sumer is icumen in”)

25. “Sumer is icumen in,” translation

Songs of the People. Here is another piece of medieval music, but it is not anything you would hear in church. No, it is the music for the traditional rhyme “Sumer is icumen in,” a down-to-earth description of the coming of Spring. You get not only the tune, but instructions for singing it as a round—which is what you get here, in a recording by the **Hilliard Ensemble**.

26. “Sumer is icumen in,” Hilliard Ensemble

27. Pieter Bruegel: *Peasant Dance* (c.1547, Vienna)

I think it is safe to say that before there was composed music, there was the **music of the people** in the streets and fields. I shall devote the entire third class to this, since it has ramifications much wider than you might think. In general, we have to assume that the words and music came into existence around the same time, but often the words get changed or disappear entirely, while the tunes remain, passed down from mother to daughter or father to son.

28. Traditional: “The fox went out on a chilly night” (text)

America, especially in the Appalachian Mountains, has preserved a long tradition of folk music, in many cases older and less altered than the equivalents you would find in Britain today. The group performing my next clip, “The fox went out on a chilly night,” is a Cleveland ensemble called **Apollo’s Fire** that normally specializes in baroque music (you will see a harpsichord among the instruments), but its members can turn equally easily to the bluegrass equivalents. The singer is **Amanda Powell**. This song dates back to the 15th century. The performance makes several points: (a) the importance in folk music of **storytelling**; (b) the importance of **rhythm** as the quality linking verse and music; and (c) the quality of **improvisation**, of folk music as a *living* tradition.

29. Traditional: “The fox went out on a chilly night” (Amanda Powell with Apollo’s Fire)

30. Section title D: Songs of the Poets (Blake: *The Sick Rose*)

Songs of the Poets. For this preview of the fourth class, which deals with vocal settings of the work of poets who publish their poetry in its own right, I am going to focus on one very short poem, in English, by **William Blake** (1757–1827). It comes from his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), published in his own full-color manuscript. We will hear it read, then in the setting by **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76). This is part of his *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings* (1943). Called “Elegy,” it is the central number in the cycle, where the very simple vocal setting of the text is framed by two extended horn solos—**showing that composers can respond to poetry, not only by setting it, but also in purely instrumental terms**. The performers are: **Nicholas Phan** (tenor), **John Thurgood** (horn), and **Ralf Gothoni** (conductor).

- 31. William Blake: “The Sick Rose,” read by Martin Harris
- 32. Britten: *Serenade for Tenor Horn and Strings*: Elegy.
- 33. Section title E (Denis: *The Muses*)

Conversations Between the Arts. The fifth class will offer a different variation on the relationship between poetry and music; **not so much a marriage, more of an affair or even a crush**. It’s what you get when an artist in one medium responds to the other at a distance *without* actually incorporating it. Britten’s setting of the songs in his *Serenade* is traditional text-setting, but his two horn solos are wordless instrumental responses. Many of the **Romantic composers, especially, gave literary titles to their piano pieces**; we’ll listen to a couple of these in the class itself.

34. Chopin, Mendelssohn, Schumann

Just as composers need not set a poem for voice in order to respond to it, so poets can also respond to music that we *don’t* hear. One of the inspirations for this course is a marvelous collection (out of print, but still obtainable used) called *The Music Lover’s Poetry Anthology*, edited by **Helen Handley Houghton** and **Maureen McCarthy Draper**. Many of the poems I shall use in this course come from it, but right now I want to focus on one of them, inspired by classical music. It impresses me precisely because the poet, **Mary Stewart Hammond** (1940–2022), admits that nothing she writes can translate Mozart into words; it is called “**Seeing** Mozart’s Piano Quartet in E-flat Major in the Old Whaling Church, Edgartown,” *not* hearing it. But in not hearing, the poet is enabling us to imagine other aspects of the concert: the setting, the community, the players as people, and other absences that will occur before the year is out.

35. Old Whaling Church, Edgartown, Martha’s Vineyard, MA

I have sent you a copy of the poem. I could not find a video of the quartet by **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91) performed by a good all-female quartet, let alone comprised of older community players who make mistakes, but I have found a student group from the New England Conservatory that has at least has three women! However, I shall read the poem in silence, because it is about *not* hearing the music, but then give you these young women as they reach the end of the first movement.

- 36. Mozart: *Piano Quartet #2 in E-flat Major* (opening, with Hammond poem)
- 37. Section title F: Words for Music (shot from *Hamilton*)

Words for Music. Finally, a section on words written especially for music—words that the poet write in order to inspire a composer, or a composer writes for himself. Much of my class on this (the sixth and last) will concentrate on the **American Songbook** and the music of Broadway, but for now I want to show you a single number, the opening scene of the 2015 mega-hit, *Hamilton*, by **Lin-Manuel Miranda** (b.1980), which **transports Rap from street to stage**. I am struck by the way something that starts as speech—albeit in rhyme—turns into a full-scale musical number almost without you knowing it. And here the marriage of poetry and music is entirely within the brain of Miranda himself, who wrote both!

- 38. Lin-Manuel Miranda: *Hamilton* (opening number)
- 39. — the same, from *Hamilton*’s entrance
- 40. Class title 3 (*Hamilton*)