Class 3: Songs of the People

A. The Flavor of Folk

1. Title slide

When I was at my first boarding school in England, between the ages of 11 and 14, we would have folksong singing every Monday evening. And while a master played at the piano, we would sing from a large book of traditional songs, sounding much like this:

2. *The Ash Grove,* opening (piano) **[0:26]**

That was the traditional Welsh song, *The Ash Grove*; it is a haunting melody, for sure. As played there, and as printed in my book, it was entirely conventional in harmony and timbre. I grew up thinking that folk songs were exactly like any of the other music I was learning to play, or the hymns we sang in chapel, although generally a lot jollier. But this was before the folk revival in the United States, and before I became aware of folksong as an international phenomenon.

3. Moonrise menu

So to start this class, I am going to play three folksongs from three different countries. The first, *Loosin Yelav,* is from Armenia; this is an arrangement by **Luciano Berio** (1925–2003). The singer is **Magdalena Kožená**, and the hardly-needed conductor is her husband, **Sir Simon Rattle**. I believe it is about the rising of the moon, hence my picture, but other than that I am just content to listen. The second song, *Gjendine's Lullaby,* is Norwegian, sung by the women we heard in the first class, the **Trio Medieval.** The third is "Green grow the rashes, O" (1784) with words and music by **Robert Burns** (1759–96). So this last is composed, and not a genuine folksong. Although it has essentially passed into the folk repertoire. This is nominally in English, but as performed here by a group called **The Band of Burns**, it is still hard to understand. So since I am going to ask you to describe the *flavor* of the three songs, I am going to leave the words as they are.

4. Berio: *Loosin Yelav* **[0:55]**
5. Grieg (arr.): *Gjendine's Lullaby* **[2:59]**
6. Burns: *Green Grow the Rashes, O* **[3:27, for total time of 7:21]**
7. Moonrise menu (repeat)

What did you hear? Is there anything they have in common? Anything special about any one of them? They all have a distinct color, don't they? They may or may not be entirely typical of their countries, but we are prepared to hear them as such. None has a strictly-observed rhythm; the singer is free to do more or less as she likes. None is in a major key: *Loosin Yelav* is minor; *Gjendine's Lullaby* is in a scale we

don't use much in classical music; and the singers in the minor-key *Green Grow the Rashes O* feel free to bend the notes all over the place.

The next song I am going to play, *Barbara Allen*, is about a haughty young woman called to the sickbed of a dying man. It tells a story, but I won't give it you the full story, because the point of a ballad like this is to keep you on the edge of your seat—more on narrative songs in a moment. It is English, and though haunting in melody is pretty conventional in style. However, this performance by the German *countertenor* **Andreas Scholl** still makes it seem pretty exotic.

8. Traditional: *Barbara Allen* (Andreas Scholl) **[3:13]**
9. Cecil Sharp in North Carolina

Folksongs were sung and preserved mouth-to-mouth by ordinary people, the kind who often emigrated to seek a better life elsewhere When emigrants moved overseas, they took their songs with them, and often they were better preserved in the new countries than in the old one. When **Cecil Sharp** (1859–1924), one of the pioneers of folksong collecting at the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries, started collecting British folk songs, he realized that he might have to go over to America to find purer versions than he could hear in Britain itself. He made three trips in all, beginning in 1916, mainly to the Appalachian Mountains. Sound recording came in only towards the end of his life (he himself wrote everything down in music notation), but listening to a traditional Appalachian singer, **Jean Ritchie** (1922–2015), even in our lifetime, shows how different the two traditions were.

10. Traditional: *Barbara Allen*. Appalachian version, sung by Jean Ritchie. **[1:12]**

B. Folksong in Context [9:38]

11. Section title B (each of the categories below)

Barbara Allen, in either version, is an example of the **storytelling** song; I'll play you another in a moment. But before that, I want to go to an even earlier song, with a different purpose: **teaching**. And then I'll look quickly at three other purposes of the folksong: **working**, **protest**, and **endurance**.

12. "Green grow the rushes, O," text

"Green grow the rushes O" seems to have been a standard folksong refrain, like "Derry down derry" or "Hey nonny no." You get it in the Burns song, and you get it in the much earlier song of the same name we teach to children. Its purpose is educational, surely—but what is is meant to teach? Counting, obviously, teaching the numbers one through twelve. But it may also be a mnemonic for various items of the Christian faith. A failed mnemonic, though, for though numbers 1, 4, and 10–12 are clear enough, the others are pretty ambiguous.

13. "Green grow the rushes, O," with interpretations

Here are some interpretations, but nobody knows for certain what it means. It has survived not because of its underlying lesson, but simply because it is such fun to sing, as in this performance of the first six numbers sung by a Chicago group called **King Solomon's Singers**.

14. "Green grow the rushes, O." Sung by King Solomon's Singers, Chicago. **[1:55]**
15. *Echad Mi Nodea*, title slide

[Parenthetically, I gather that there is a Hebrew equivalent of this idea, the Passover song ***Echad Mi Yodea***, intended for children but containing a serious doctrinal message. I have no time to play it now, but I put it on the website, sung by a rabbi and her family, and also in a wonderful choreographed version by an Israeli youth group.]

16. Early variants of "O waly, waly"

Another standard refrain in folksongs is "O waly, waly," meaning roughly "Alas, alas!" For songs about the woes of love—early versions of the Blues—are much more common than those about the joys. The two versions of the song shown here are different from each other, and different again from the best-known version today, which was pieced together by Cecil Sharp from a variety of sources. Here it is in a very simple arrangement by **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76); he lets the song speak for itself; the only thing he does is add to the tension by gradually taking the piano into more remote keys, while the voice remains the same throughout. The singer is the great **Kathleen Ferrier**.

17. Traditional, arr. Britten: "O, waly, waly." Sung by Kathleen Ferrier. **[3:24]**
18. "Boney was a warior" text

Storytelling need not be fictional; it can also deal with real history. The song "Boney was a Warrior" tells the brilliant rise and sad eclipse of Napoleon Bonaparte, and obviously dates from the early nineteenth century. The visuals in this video by **Paul Clayton** that I found on the web move much more quickly than anything I would make myself, but I did add the text. The song tells a story, but it has another purpose too; I wonder if yu can guess what it is?

19. Traditional: "Boney was a warrior". Sung by Paul Clayton. **[1:19]**
20. "Boney was a warior" text, repeat

What do you think is the original context of this? It is a **sea shanty**, a catchy song developed among seamen to help them in their repetitive work. And what better way than to disrespect your erstwhile foe? There is a leader, and a simple repeated chorus for the men doing the work.

21. "It's a Long John," refrain

A close relative of the work song are the **marching chants** still used by the US Army, based on a similar pattern of statement and response. Although these are not sung, they are intensely rhythmical, which is their point. But we do have a recording of a **chain-gang song**, recorded in 1934 with actual prisoners. I can't hear many of the words on the recording—they seem to be about getting in and out of jail—and

those available in print do not match up at all. Still, at the end of the clip, I will show you one verse that I found on line, since it leads so well into my next topic.

22. "It's a Long John," prison chain gang recorded in 1934. **[1:48]**
23. "It's a Long John," text fragment

I wanted you to see those words because they show that songs of suffering often turn to the Bible. Hence the genre of the **Spiritual**. This is a largely separate tradition growing up among the slaves, with African influences in the music and format, and Christian ones in their sentiment—raising their hope to God when there is really so little reason to hope at all. Nowadays, we tend to hear Spirituals mainly as concert items, in the work of some clever arranger, sung by groups that may not be African American. But some can be very effective, as in this version of *The Gospel Train*; I should have put "*little* children."

24. Traditional: *The Gospel Train*. US Navy Sea Chanters. **[1:42]**
25. Still from *Twelve Years a Slave*.

But was this neat choral arrangement and peppy style the way on the plantation? For that, I offer you this clip from the movie *Twelve Years a Slave*, which I imagine is much truer to real life.

26. "Roll, Jordan, Roll," from *Twelve Years a Slave*. **[2:11]**

Amazingly, the top comment for this clip on YouTube is the following from a young white woman: "*I love African Americans their songs make me happy! I hate how people don't treat them the same it makes me feel like this isn't the United States anymore?*" While I could just about see this for *Gospel Train*, it is hard to imagine how one short comment could be so wrong on so many fronts when applied to this one!

27. Bob Dylan, Nobel Prize

The general definition of folk music is that it should be transmitted orally, and have no composer. In the modern era, the oral transmission requirement is obviously a tall order. And so is the no-composer one. The revival of interest in Folk generally in the middle of the last century was of course accompanied by a generation of singer-songwriters *writing* songs in the folk style: simple ballad forms, sung with a deliberate avoidance of concert-hall polish, played on acoustic instruments, and music that supports the sentiment of the *words*. And those words were often songs of protest, songs that addressed the issues of the day, such as the Vietnam War, and social inequality. If **Bob Dylan** (b.1941) had been a musician in any other field, it would make no sense that he should win the Nobel Prize for *Literature*, but as a folk musician—and given the political leanings of the Nobel committee—it does have a certain logic.

28. Bob Dylan: "Blowin' in the Wind." **[2:37]**
29. Corita Kent: "Where have all the flowers gone?"

Here is another quasi-folk protest song associated with the Vietnam era: "Where have all the flowers gone?" I made this slide of antiwar posters by **Sister Corita Kent** (1918–86) for a course I gave some years ago on Women in the Arts. It accompanied a rendition of the song by **Joan Baez**, who I assumed

wrote it. But I discover now that it actually dates from 1955, when **Pete Seeger** (1919–2014) put his own version of a Cossack text together with an Irish tune. Folk is indeed international!

30. Joan Baez: "Where have all the flowers gone?" **[1:11]**

C. Folksongs in Performance [10:11]

31. Section title C (three postcards)

Finally, a very brief account of how folksong has entered the classical repertoire of opera house and concert hall. I would be remiss not to mention the eighteenth-century genre of **Ballad Opera**, which came into vogue in the earlier 18th century as a domestic equivalent to the hifalutin' Italian opera—Broadway versus the Met, as it were. The first of these to achieve fame was *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), the work of a playwright named **John Gay** (1685–1732), set among the lower echelons of society: beggars, highwaymen, and whores. And the beauty of it was that it didn't need a fancy composer writing Italian music; all the songs were **popular ballads** of the day, arranged by **Johann Pepusch** (1667–1752). Here are two, "Fill every glass" and "Let us take the road," in the **Peter Brook** film from 1953.

32. Gay/Pepusch: *The Beggar's Opera*, choruses (film by Peter Brook, 1953) **[2:32]**
33. Scene from *The Bartered Bride*

The Ballad Opera did not last long as a genre, but as Romantic opera composers of the later 19th century began to tackle plots that would reflect the culture of their own countries, they turned to folk songs and especially dances as flavor capsules that would both set the scene and excite the audiences, as in this opening scene from Smetana's *Bartered Bride*

34. *High Germany* title

Folksongs serve as markers, both for history and geography. Take the text shown here, the song *High Germany*. It is about a young man who has been recruited to the army, trying to persuade his sweetheart to come with him. So it represents a date, more or less: the Thirty Years' War or one of those other conflicts in the earlier 18th century. And it represents a place, for **Cecil Sharp**, who collected it, found it sung mainly in the Southwest of the country, **Somerset**. Here it is sung by **Martin Carthy**:

35. Traditional: *High Germany* (Martin Carthy) **[0:24]**
36. Vaughan Williams and Holst

Folksong played a large part in the renaissance of English music at the start of the 20th century. Many young composers, such as **Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872–1958) and **Gustav Holst** (1874–1934) here, felt that folk material offered an alternative to the German Romantic tradition of Brahms and Bruckner. The two friends would go on field trips together to listen to old villagers and write down their songs, and both incorporated them in works for orchestra or band. This particular song was suggested to them by **Cecil Sharp**, and they both incorporated it in pieces with other songs from Somerset that they had

collected themselves. Holst wrote *A Somerset Rhapsody* in 1907 for orchestra; Vaughan Williams saved the Somerset songs to use them in a *Folk Song Suite* he wrote for wind band in 1923. As fate would have it, the best recordings I could find are the other way around: a band arrangement of the Holst, and RVW's own orchestration of his band piece!

37. Sam Vanderwoude, screenshot

I'll just play the "High Germany" section of the Holst. When I found this on YouTube, I assumed it was a COVID pandemic project, where the band director had assembled all the players on Zoom. But then I looked again, and again… some of them looked suspiciously alike… no, they *all* looked alike! This is one person, **Sam Vanderwoude**, playing all 45 parts of the score. Literally a one-man band! I'll follow it with the Vaughan Williams *Folk Songs from Somerset*; "High Germany" is not the first tune you will hear, but it comes in pretty soon. This is the **Orchestra of Saint Martin in the Fields** under Sir **Neville Marriner**. I put the audio together with images from a tourist video of Somerset. The other songs are "Blow Away The Morning Dew," "The Tree So High" and "John Barley's Corn."

38. Holst: *Somerset Rhapsody*, excerpt (Sam Vanderwoude) **[0:58]**
39. Vaughan Williams: *Folk Songs from Somerset* **[3:09]**
40. Luciano Berio and Cathy Berberian

Finally, let me return to the work with which I started the class, the *Folk Songs* of **Luciano Berio**. This is a concert piece pure and simple; Berio takes songs from all over the world and arranges them for voice and chamber ensemble. Here is the last of them: an **Azerbaijani** folk song taken from an old 78 rpm record, and transcribed phonetically, with no idea what the text means, and apparently no intention of finding out. The point is simply to wonder "What the heck?"! This is an old video, but it has the composer himself conducting his late wife, the Armenian-American mezzo-soprano **Cathy Berberian**, for whom he wrote it. You can't get more authentic than that!

41. Berio: *Folk Songs*. Azerbaijani love song. **[2:11]**
42. Class title 3 (Azerbaijani wedding)

My closing image of a wedding, incidentally, is also from Azerbaijan. Clearly that love song worked!