Class 5: A Conversation Among the Arts

A. Close Encounters

1. Title Slide (Maurice Denis: *The Muses*)
2. Menu slide

This class is called **A Conversation Among the Arts.** We are going to look at a variety of ways in which music and poetry (and occasionally other arts as well) may talk to one another, but largely excluding the more usual situation of the composer setting the poet's text as song. I am dividing it into two parts: Close Encounters and Birdsong. The pictures below show Shelley and his Skylark; the ones at top left are the composer **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827) and the former Poet Laureate **Rita Dove**. We'll start with Beethoven. Imagine you are in Vienna in 1824, enjoying a peaceful slow movement, when suddenly…

3. Beethoven: *Choral Symphony*, interruption! **[1:21]**
4. — still from the above

That, of course, was entirely my own confection! But just imagine. You are going to a perfectly normal Vienna concert in 1824, and have almost fallen asleep after an hour of music, when suddenly a man jumps up and declaims that he doesn't want any more of this stuff; what he wants is POETRY! And suddenly eighty singers jump to their feet and begin singing! If I were trying to reproduce that today, I'd have the bass actually come running in, and then fly out a backcloth behind the orchestra to reveal the chorus and three other soloists that you never guessed were there. Today, of course, it is advertised and you know what you are getting from the start. But just imagine if you didn't! Here is the moment of transition in an actual performance today; this is the **Chicago Symphony** under **Riccardo Muti**, with **Eric Owens** the bass soloist.

5. Beethoven: *Choral Symphony*, entry of the voices **[4:12]**
6. — still from the above with Schiller

This is not a mere setting of a text, but an invitation for one medium to break into the sacred space previously dedicated to a quite different one. Here poetry is not so much having a conversation with music, as rudely interrupting it! With eight symphonies behind him, Beethoven felt the need to add something new to the mix. So here he is channeling the noble aspiration of **Friedrich Schiller** (1759–1805), sampling him, as it were. Vocal symphonies never became stadard, but later composers occasionally followed where Bethoven led, notably Berlioz, Mahler (three times), and Vaughan Williams.

7. Shakespeare, Byron, Scott

The arts of the Nineteenth Century, the Romantic Era, were very much dominated by literature. Much of the painting, for example, was based on literary subjects. It was the era when opera came to the fore as

an international phenomenon; many of the plots were taken from **Shakespeare**, **Byron**, or **Sir Walter Scott**. It is the century of the great songwriters **Schubert** and **Schumann** taking texts from Goethe, Schiller, and Heine. The combination of poetry and music in a great song may be thought of as the perfect marriage, but today we are looking for examples where the marriage is not consummated; Beethoven's *Choral Symphony* is more like an abduction. What interests me today are the flirtations and even more distant encounters, ships that pass in the night.

8. Chopin, Mendelssohn, and Schumann

Here are three instrumental composers: **Chopin** exclusively so, but **Mendelssohn** and **Schumann** also wrote songs. But many of their piano compositions had literary rather than musical titles. There is some evidence, for example, that Chopin's *Ballades* evoke the poems of his compatriot, **Adam Mickiewicz.** The pieces are long, so I won't play one right now, though I'll post a clip online. But among the many poems on Chopin that I found online, I particularly enjoyed this one by a presumably-amateur poet.

9. Shivam S. "On Hearing Chopin"
10. Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*

And the pieces by **Felix Mendelssohn** (1809–47) that every young student encounters are entitled *Songs Without Words*; my own copy is so worn out that I will have to replace it. Not all of these 50 pieces could be sung, and they do not seem to tell stories, but there are many in which you can distinctly hear the human voice through the piano—or two human voices, as in the case of the piece called "Duetto." This is first half, played by the great Russian pianist **Emil Gilels**.

11. Mendelssohn: "Duetto" from *Lieder ohne Worte.* **[3:04]**
12. Beethoven and Rita Dove

The rest of this class of will focus on poems that have *not* been set to music themselves, but reflect a Close Encounter between a poet and a particular piece of music. Rita Dove wrote a book of short poems inspired by the **Beethoven** *Kreutzer Sonata*. Let's start by listening to a snatch of it.

13. Beethoven: *Kreuzer Sonata,* opening **[1:15]**
14. Rita Dove and *Sonata Mulattica*

The *Kreutzer* is by far the most difficult of all the Beethoven sonatas; my wife and I have a go at all the others, but we won't touch this one! The violinist here, **Randall Goosby**, clearly had no problem. Among the dozen or so performers on YouTube, he was the only one I could find who was black. And this is important, for the original inspiration for the sonata was the mulatto violin prodigy **George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower**, whom he called his *gran pazzo* or crazy wild man. But they fell out over a girl and Beethoven angrily rededicated it to another violinist who in the end never ever played it. So, instead of the "Bridgetower Sonata," we have the *Kreutzer*. This fact fascinated Pulitzer Prize-winner and former Poet Laureate **Rita Dove** (b.1952), who wrote a sequence of 100 poems speculating on Bridgetower's life, that became the book shown here, *Sonata Mulattica.* Here, in her own voice is how It opens.

15. Rita Dove: *The Bridgetower* **[1:42]**

And here's how Bridgetower describes the music Bethoven gives him to play, as she imagines it; this one I'll have to read myself.

16. Rita Dove: "Polgreen Sight-Reading" from *Sonata Mulattica*.
17. Brahms title for the *Clarinet Quintet*.

Not every poet is so ambitious, but plenty have written individual poems about music. The collection I recommended earlier, *The Music Lover's Poetry Anthology*, has several by the Canadian philosopher and poet **Jan Zwicky** (b.1955). She has one about listening to the *Clarinet Quintet* by **Johannes Brahms** (1833–97)—but I'll wait before showing it. First, let's hear how the music begins. The clarinettist is **Charles Neidich** with the **Parker Quartet** (not the group shown here). Take notes as you listen, and let's discuss your impressions.

18. Brahms: *Clarinet Quintet*, exposition **[4:02]**
19. — still from the above

What did you hear? To me, there is a deep but beautiful quality of melancholy. It feels like music about autumn, memories, regret. It is even more poignant when you know that Brahms had already retired from composing when he met the clarinetist **Richard Mühlfeld** in 1891 and heard him play. In a remarkably fruitful Indian Summer, he composed this Quintet, a Trio, and two Sonatas, all for Mühlfeld, four of his richest and most reflective works.

20. Jan Zwicky: "Brahms' Clarinet Quintet in B Minor, Op. 115."

So here is Jan Zwicky's response. Right away, she picks up immediately on the color: "brown, its reedy clarities"; she is a musician herself. It is not an easy poem, and clearly more than just a description of the music. It is part of a 1996 collection entitled *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth,* a elegy for a rapidly degrading world. She did not publish it in the normal way, nor advertise it, but stitched together hand-printed pages book by by for people who had heard about it by word of mouth.

21. Cover of *Kind of Blue*

I don't entirely know why, but a strangely high proportion of the poems in the anthology are about nostalgia; maybe music does that to you. Here is one example, from the world of jazz: *Blue in Green* by **Grace Schulman** (b.1935). The title refers to a track on the classic, 1959 album by **Miles Davis** (1926–91), *Kind of Blue.* It was entirely improvised, and recorded virtually in a single take. The saxophonist, whom you will hear at the beginning, is **John Coltrane**. But the point of my playing it is to enclose Schulman's fine poem, which she reads here herself. The images are by **William Baziotes** (1912–63).

22. Davis/Schulman: *Blue in Green*

Note all the bird imagery in the poem: Coltrane's saxophone "rising alone, [like] birds in flight… a tern's cry." They take me to the second section of the class: **Birdsong**.

B. Birdsong

23. Section title B (Shelley)

This is a very young **Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792–1822) with his **Skylark**. I'll have a lot more about both of them in a moment. The imitation of birdsong in music has a very long history. The violin soloist in the *Four Seasons* by **Antonio Vivaldi** (1678–1741), for instance, throws it in all over the place.

24. Vivaldi: *Spring*, sonnet in English.

But I bring in Vivaldi for a different reason. Poetry can lie behind a musical score, even when the words are not set to music. The earliest (1725) scores of the *Four Seasons* contain printed sonnets exactly mirroring the content of each of the twelve movements. It is not known who wrote them; the presumption is Vivaldi himself. Even so, this is a chicken-and-egg thing: did Vivaldi write the poems first and then compose music to match them, or did he write to formalize his existing musical ideas? Anyway, the parallel is quite exact; although instrumental rather than vocal, the concerti could be seen as hidden settings of their underlying poems, or as **ekphrastic poetry** imitating the music. But even if he wrote them, they could have been a kind of blueprint for the music that was to follow. Here is the text of the opening movement (I think in my own translation), followed by a performance of that movement by **Janine Jansen** and the **Amsterdam Sinfonietta**. It is not the most vibrant recording, but I treasure the interplay she has with her fellow musicians. And of course that birdsong!

25. Vivaldi: *Spring*, opening movement **[3:20]**
26. Shelley: *To a Skylark*, first four stanzas

So now we get to go to Shelley. Here are the first four stanzas of *To a Skylark*; I am going to try an experiment, letting you hear them in five different versions, and inviting you to compare them. The first two are audio only, one read by a woman, the other by a man. Just as music does not need words to be poetic, so poetry does not need to be sung to be musical. However, the reader does need to be attuned to the inherent music. If we are talking about conversations with the text, the reader too is engaging in a conversation with the poet, simply through the choices he or she makes in tone and delivery. So how do these two differ in the tone they bring to it, the rhythm, and the music they find in it?

27. Shelley: *To a Skylark*, opening (Mary Ann) **[0:49]**
28. Shelley: *To a Skylark*, opening (Tony Britton) **[0:48]**

What did you think? The first reader was a volunteer for Librivox, introducing herself simply as **Mary Anne**. She is aware of the music in the poetry, I think, and makes the sense quite clear. But the second reader, a professional actor called **Tony Britton**, takes risks, filling the poem with a surging energy that is certainly in tune with the skylark's flight, but perhaps out of scale with it size. My third example, put together by someone called **Pavan Paul Keetley**, adds a different photograph for each verse, plus some background music that I'll talk more about in a moment. What do you think of his reading, and what is the effect of the two additions?

29. Shelley: *To a Skylark*, opening (Paul Pavan Keetley) **[1:27]**

Your ideas? My own view about the third example is that while the man's choice of music is totally appropriate and his visual images are not bad, they are overkill; some kinds of conversations between the arts are not dialogues so much as each shouting the other out. However, I am interested in the music he chose, a piece for violin and orchestra by **Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872–1958) called *The Lark Ascending* (1920). This too is a response to a poem, not the Shelley but one by **George Meredith** (1828—1909). Here is the quotation he put in the score.

30. Vaughan Williams: *The Lark Ascending* score, with Meredith poem

It's not actually a very good poem, and I question whether Vaughan Williams really was composing in response to it, so much as to the birdsong he could hear simply by walking out of doors. But his music has a poetry that does not need a verse to back it up. Here is the beginning of a performance by Baltimore's **Hilary Hahn**; I'll put the whole thing on the website.

31. Vaughan Williams: *The Lark Ascending*, opening

Having said that the music in the background of the Keetley reading seemed superfluous, my last Shelley clip may surprise you, as it is an actual song setting with sung words, though I can't hear them clearly enough to add as titles. But if you listen carefully, you will see that the composer, **Julie Cooper** (1964–), has not used the poem literally, but made a collage from it, for example with the title, "To a Skylark," repeated again and again as a refrain. So this is also a kind of conversation. Cooper wrote it as a gift for this mother-son pair, **Grace and Joshua Davidson**.

32. Julie Cooper: *To a Skylark* **[3:50]**
33. Handel, Milton, and Morris

I want to end with a more complex example. It starts with something we have mostly not seen in this class, an actual setting of a poem by a composers, but the conversation in this case involves an entirely different art: dance. We heard Schiller's *Hymn to Joy* as set by Beethoven. Another work whose subject is Joy is *L'Allegro* by **John Milton** (1608–74), which he wrote along with a contrasting ode, *Il Pensieroso*. **Georg Frideric Handel** (1685–1759) interleaved them into an oratorio, adding a third voice, *Il Moderato*, creating an alternation of lively and quiet passages. Here is a short section from the oratorio in which the tenor dismisses **Melancholy** and calls **Mirth** in its place; the orchestra bursts out into flourishes of sheer joy, as though all the birds had come out with the sun.

34. Handel: *L'Allegro*..., "Hence, loathèd Melancholy" **[1:06]**
35. — text of the above

There is nothing so unusual in this; Handel wrote a large variety of oratorios, on secular subjects as well as sacred ones like the *Messiah.* But the addition of dance brings a new voice into the conversation. In his masterpiece of 1988, also called *L'Allegro, il Pensieroso, ed il Moderato,* American choreographer **Mark Morris** (b.1956) treats his two partners differently. He stays very close to the music, but engages

in joking badinage with the words. So for instance Handel's outpouring of birdsong, which derives from Milton's single mention of a lark, is developed by Morris into an exuberant section called "Birding."

36. Morris: *L'Allegro, il Pensieroso ed il Moderato*, "Birding" **[4:07]**
37. Class title 2 (thumbnails)

My closing slide includes several people I used in the previous course, but had to cut from this one. Still, they are all in conversation with each other!