

Class 6: Words for Music

A. Words or Music?

1. Title Slide (Judy Garland)

Two weeks ago, we looked at composers writing music for texts that already existed. Today, we shall consider the opposite: lyricists writing words specifically for a composer to set, sometimes for already-existing music. It is another huge subject, and once more I can only grab at pieces of it. So I have decided to concentrate exclusively on American works, mainly by comparing two quartets of similar songs written over a span of decades. But first, let's get one basic distinction straight.

2. Section title A (*Anything Goes*)

We'll look at two songs from the 1934 musical *Anything Goes*. Both music and lyrics are by **Cole Porter** (1891–1964), set aboard a transatlantic liner heading for England. The first, "You're the top," starts with the female lead, **Reno Sweeney** (**Sutton Foster** in this 2021 London revival) singing to the hero **Billy Crocker** (**Samuel Edwards**) to boost his confidence. She loves him, but her love is not returned, as he loves the débutante **Hope Harcourt**; so this is a friendship duet in which she puts her own feelings aside to convince him that he is worthy of her. This is quite long, but it is the only song of its kind that I shall be playing today.

3. Porter: *Anything Goes*, "You're the top" [5:14]

Though engaged to somebody else, Hope does love Billy. So when he is arrested in the middle of Act Two and she feels she has lost him, she sings a much shorter song with quite a different quality: "Goodbye, little dream." Here is **Nicole-Lily Baisden** singing it in the same production. I'd like you to compare the two, in particularly asking the question: which is more important, the words or the music?

4. Porter: *Anything Goes*, "Goodbye, little dream" [1:30]

5. Stills of the two scenes above

How would you answer? The words/music thing is entirely clear. "You're the top" is all about the words, which are witty and topical; even though we may not get all the references, the performers themselves seem to take delight in the escalating absurdity of the similes. This kind of verbal brilliance was a Porter specialty, but you also get it with **Irving Berlin** and **Ira Gershwin**. Indeed sentimental songs like "Goodbye, little dream" are something of a rarity in musicals from the first half of the century; Hope's song is the only one of its kind in the score. I had intended to treat the two kinds of songs, **clever** and **sentimental**, more or less equally in the class, but while there are a lot of examples of the former, I find the evolution of the sentimental ballad is a lot more interesting, so that's what we'll do.

B. Longing & Regret

6. Section title B (Tin Pan Alley covers)

13. Harris: “After the ball is over,” text of the chorus

Taking my cue from “Goodbye, little dream,” I’d like to give you a few later examples of the **sentimental ballad** type of song, all dealing with longing and regret. We shall discuss them in the context of the main theme of this course: the relationship between words and music. I am going to perform, if you like, quite gentle autopsies on four American standards. The song at the top right here, “After the Ball is Over,” was the first mega-hit in popular music. Written in 1891 by **Charles K. Harris** (1867–1930)—both words and music—it sold over two million copies of sheet music in the succeeding year, which was how success was measured. When **Jerome Kern** (1885–1945) and **Oscar Hammerstein II** (1895–60) were writing the musical *Show Boat* in 1927, and wanted to insert a stage act that would bring back the flavor of the late 19th century, they borrowed Harris’s song. Here is **Rebecca Baxter** singing it in the 1989 production aired on PBS.

7. Harris: “After the ball is over,” as quoted in *Show Boat* [1:25]

8. — still from the above

What do you think of the text? It is sentimental, of course, but I think it is effective. First because it is based on a *paradox*—that even in the context of high romance, hearts may be broken in secret. And second, because of the *sequence of connected images* (ball over, break of morn, dancers leaving, stars gone) which reinforce this paradox in a natural way, without seeming forced. But this is only the chorus; it comes after three verses of set-up, each of which is significantly longer than the chorus itself. Here is the opening half-verse sung by the writer himself, **Charles K. Harris**, towards the end of his life.

9. Harris: “After the ball is over,” sung by himself [1:00]

10. Text of all three verses.

Here is the full text. Not to put too fine a point on it, I think it sucks! There is none of the natural flow of images you get in the chorus. It is a very elaborate and fictional set up to particularize perceptive and true observation that “many a heart is broken, after the ball.” And it contains some simply dreadful lines, such as “List to the story, I’ll tell it all.” I think that Harris hit upon the chorus first—a few phrases of words or music, or maybe both, I don’t know—but then had come come up a way to give it a context, as convention demanded at the time (and would continue to demand until the mid-20th century at least). The situation is inherently implausible, and the words to describe it are obviously manufactured.

11. “Somewhere over the rainbow,” title

My next gentle deconstruction is of “Somewhere over the rainbow,” the opening song of the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*; it is the first we see of **Judy Garland**, then only 16. Let’s watch the clip. The song does not have the long introduction that “After the Ball” had; being in a movie, it grows straight out of the dialogue, perfectly naturally. So it begins with the title phrase, which in a standalone song

would be the chorus. It does, however, have a **bridge passage** ("Someday I'll wish upon a star") that makes the return of the big theme even more heartwarming.

12. Harburg and Arlen: "Somewhere over the rainbow," in *The Wizard of Oz* [2:38]

13. Harburg and Arlen

The music is by **Harold Arlen** (1905–86) and the words by **Yip Harburg** (1896–1981). Now in the kind of collaborations I have done professionally myself, the words always come first: the lyricist provides the script and the composer either sets it as is, or gets the writer to tinker with it until he can set it. But this is not always, or even usually, the case with popular music. In this case, according to Wikipedia, Harburg had the initial inspiration: "*a ballad for a little girl who was in trouble and wanted to get away from Kansas. A dry, arid, colorless place. She had never seen anything colorful in her life except the rainbow.*" Arlen decided the idea needed "*a melody with a long broad line*". It was the last thing he composed for the show, but apparently it came to him driving in downtown Los Angeles with his wife; telling her to pull over, he grabbed a scrap of manuscript and jotted it down. Back home a few hours later, the song did emerge as "*a melody with a long broad line*". Here is **Yo-Yo Ma** with pianist **Kathryn Stott**.

14. Arlen: "Somewhere over the rainbow," Yo-Yo Ma [0:25]

15. Yip Harburg: words for the song

So Yip Harburg went home with that long melody and came up with the words. Just looking at them as text, I don't think much more highly of it than Charles Harris's verses for *After the Ball*; "If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow, why, oh why can't I?" is really pretty cheesy, and "troubles melt like lemon drops" is not much better. BUT, if you consider these as words to articulate already-existing music, they take on a different aspect. For one thing, note that there is almost no punctuation; the words do not impose a syntax on the music, but follow the music's syntax. For another, note that the questionable images such as the bluebirds come in quite late; they are not the substance of the idea, merely ornaments to it. And finally, listen for how effectively these words support Arlen's idea of the long melodic line. Here is Garland again, with my annotations on the text.

16. Harburg and Arlen: "Somewhere over the rainbow," audio with text [2:12]

17. *Moon River* title

I'll leave my last example mainly to you. It is another rainbow's end song, also the opening song in a movie, which this time is not basically a musical. Near the beginning of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), the writer character (a stand-in for the author **Truman Capote**, played by **George Peppard**) hears his neighbor **Holly Golightly** (Audrey Hepburn) out on the fire escape, singing a song, *Moon River*. Let's listen. Tell me how you think it works, how it compares to "Over the Rainbow," and what the text contributes to the effect of the song.

18. Mercer and Mancini: "Moon River" scene [1:55]

19. — text of the above (repeat)

So using the same methods, what do you think? This has always stuck with me as the perfect ballad of yearning. It's a wonderful tune, for one thing; the composer is **Henry Mancini** (1924–94). I read that the

lyricist, **Johnny Mercer** (1909–76), generally liked to have the music before writing the words, just like Yip Harburg did; do you think that was the case here? Personally, I doubt it; the music is not a standalone melody, but seems to follow the rhythm of the words; it is difficult to believe this was done by reverse engineering. I like it that they do not attempt to make any obvious logical syntax—just a series of images, slightly off-center, but adding up very strongly to a mood. It is not just the words, but the spaces between the words that count. They are based, apparently, on memories of his childhood growing up in Savannah. The setting in the movie is also perfect, because it begins so simply, with just the guitar accompaniment; the studio orchestra enters only halfway through. The producers wanted to cut the song as dead weight, but Hepburn said “Over my dead body,” though in more colorful language!

20. “Send in the Clowns” still (Judi Dench)

Since we seem to have gotten into the mood for sad ballads, I’ll give you just one more: “Send in the Clowns” from *A Little Night Music* (1973) by **Stephen Sondheim** (1930–2021). It became a big hit on its own—the takeaway number from the show—but Sondheim did not originally include it; he wrote it more or less overnight at the request of the director **Harold Prince**. The character is **Desirée**, a famous but now aging actress, forced to confront her own mortality. The phrase “send in the clowns” is a theatrical one, referring to what goes on after the serious business of drama has come to its close. There is an interesting interview with Sondheim in which he discusses the song; I’ll put it on the web. It includes a rehearsal scene with the original actress, in which the music director tells her to approach it, not as music carrying the words, but words which gradually become music. Here is **Dame Judi Dench** in a BBC Promenade Concert in London.

21. Sondheim: *A Little Night Music*, “Send in the Clowns” (Judi Dench) [4:30]

C. History in Song

22. Section title C (WWI recruiting poster)

I had intended to do a whole section on American “**clever songs**,” text-intensive songs like Cole Porter’s “You’re the Top.” But that became a problem, in that any selection I made would be entirely arbitrary. So I decided instead to devote the last section to a simple proposition: that the words in text-intensive songs can be used for serious purposes as well as frivolous ones, reflecting what is going on in the real world. So a brief glimpse of American 20th-century history through song.

23. George M. Cohan, words of “Over There”

In writing the World War One recruitment song “Over There” in 1917, **George M. Cohan** (1878–1942) needed to counteract the American resistance to involvement in a European war. Not only did his song fill the bill in WW1, it was also recalled to service in WW2, as there were no new songs with the power to match it. The words aren’t particular clever—basic patriotic stuff, with appeals to manhood, love, and family. But it has one brilliant line, “*And we won’t come back till it’s over, over there,*” and a three-note

bugle-call phrase to match it, and that was enough. Here, from the 1942 film *Yankee Doodle Dandy* starring **James Cagney**, is a reconstruction of how Cohan thought that phrase up.

24. Cohan: “Over There,” from *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) [3:30]

25. “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” title side

The War ushered in the Roaring Twenties, but they didn’t last, and we got the Stock Market Crash and Great Depression. Surely no song captures the pain of that era so well as “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” written by **Yip Harburg** and **Jay Gorney** (1896–1990) for a revue in 1932. Yes, the same Yip Harburg who would go on to write “Someday over the Rainbow”! It was written for a Broadway revue called *Americana*, but it shot to fame only after it was picked up by the likes of Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallee, and Al Jolson, who sung it on the airwaves. Apparently business leaders tried to ban it as “a dangerous attack on the American economic system,” but the song was already too popular.

26. “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” text

Most songs of the period were resolutely upbeat, as we shall hear in a moment, but this one is slow, in a minor key, and resolutely realistic. Here is the text; can you see why it should have succeeded? I think it is because it gives the speaker a dignity—he is someone who has done something for his country to be proud of—and because it is so devoid of cliché and utterly honest. It is hard to imagine the same author writing “Where happy little bluebirds sing” only a decade later. I won’t play it in a recording from the period, but in a modern cover by an Australian singer called **Bruce Hearn** that evokes the period well, but then goes on to show that it is still relevant, even today. Brace yourselves—

27. Harburg and Gorney: “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” (Bruce Hearn) [3:55]

28. “Happy Days are Here Again” title side

When I was preparing this class, I assumed that my next song, “Happy Days are Here Again,” came chronologically after “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” After all, we associate it with **FDR**, the **New Deal**, and the beginning of the end of the Depression. But I was wrong. The song was written in 1929, as part of a movie musical, *Chasing Rainbows*; the words are by **Jack Yellen** (1892–1991) and the music by **Milton Ager** (1893–1979). It’s context, therefore, is fantasy. It was only an afterthought that FDR’s advisers chose to play it at his 1932 convention, thus bringing it into real life. Once again, I will play it in a cover version, because I am so taken with this particular video. It looks like archival footage of VE Day, or shortly before it, with the US Army liberating some small town in Europe. But in fact, after the first clips, it is all a reconstruction by a Belgian group called **The Army Stars**, and the whole thing is staged. Brilliantly so, it seems to me.

29. Ager & Yellen: “Happy Days are Here Again!” (Army Stars) [2:37]

30. Streisand

I want to add a footnote to “Happy Days.” The young **Barbra Streisand** sang it on her first record in 1962. She includes the introductory verse, which just slips into the familiar chorus. But the effect is entirely different: can you hear what she is doing?

31. Ager & Yellen: “Happy Days are Here Again!” (opening, Streisand) [1:58]

32. Streisand with words

Did you hear the difference? Although she will pick it up later, she begins quietly and down-tempo like a **ballad**. It now has a wistfulness, like “Over the Rainbow.”

33. Miranda graphic

One final piece of American history in song, if there is time, albeit more ancient history. It is the climax of “I’m not throwing away my shot” from *Hamilton* (2015), which follows immediately after the sequence I played in the first class. I wanted to close the circle of words giving rise to music, as you hear the seamless integration of rhythmic speech and song—a flexibility only made possible by the use of rap. In this case, both words and music are by the same man, **Lin-Manuel Miranda** (b.1980), who also played the title role. Apart from all those talents, Miranda’s great insight was to realize that the kind of aggressive energy typical of a contemporary ghetto genre can be transferred to a historical drama about the founding fathers of this country.

34. Miranda: *Hamilton*, “My Shot” [2:21]

35. Class title 3 (Broadway)