

Class 12 : Strange Bedfellows

B. A Musical Mashup

1. Main title 3 (still from *ARIA*)

In our final hour, I am going to play videos of four musical works, from 1969 to 2010, each of which exhibits some elements of the Postmodern aesthetic. I will give you a list of some of these elements in a moment, but first I want to play a very beautiful piece whose music and pathos I think will speak for itself. It comes from a 1987 film called *ARIA*, produced by a man called **Don Boyd**, who got ten different directors each to make a music video based upon an aria from opera. I am going to play the entry by **Derek Jarman** (1942–94). The aria is “Depuis le jour” from *Louise* (1900) by **Gustave Charpentier** (1860–1956). There are no titles, but that is not important; the aria is a young girl reveling in the ecstasy of her first experience of love. Put aside logic for the moment; think of it as a cocktail. Does it work?

2. Charpentier: “Depuis le jour” (Derek Jarman episode from *ARIA*)

3. The Postmodern Aesthetic

Consider the question of period. These are the thoughts of a young girl from 1900, with the video of an old woman in a dress from around 1800, miming to a modern opera singer singing the late romantic music of 1900, interspersed with early home movies, all put together by a director in the 1980s. Not only is there no consistency of time, there is an active denial of it. You will have glimpsed this already in the works by Bacon, Rauschenberg, Rivers, and Shonibare. Freedom from the constraints of historicity is a key factor in postmodernism, as is the combination of different materials and media. The aesthetic undoubtedly reflects the fragmentation of the modern world, but its intent is deeper than that: to break away from the patriarchal artist-knows-all approach, and offer something where the real response is in the mind of the individual listener or beholder, working through instinct rather than logic.

4. Title for *Eight Songs for a Mad King* by Peter Maxwell Davies, 1969

You will hear the mixture of periods very clearly in the next work I shall play, the seventh of the *Eight Songs for a Mad King* written in 1969 by **Peter Maxwell Davies** (1934–2016); I think I was at the first performance. The Mad King is of course George III. The text by Randolph Stow uses a lot of the king’s own words, delivered by a singing actor who must surely call upon a wider vocal range than ever heard before in performance; the performer here is **Kelvin Thomas**. The music is aggressively atonal at times, but incorporates various popular tunes at others. And the movement I am going to play quotes directly from the opening of *Messiah* by **George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759), the King’s favorite composer. I have two recordings of this opening: one with a singer and orchestra, the other played by me on the piano, which may make it easier to hear those repeated chords that Maxwell Davies not only quotes, but turns into music of quite another kind. When I get to the actual piece, listen for how many different periods you can hear, or imply from what you see.

5. Handel: *Messiah*, opening lines (orchestra)
6. Handel: *Messiah*, opening lines (piano)
7. Maxwell Davies: *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, #7

What did you find? I counted the music from *Messiah* (1742), the words of King George III (went mad around 1788), the dance-band rhythms of the 1920s and 1930s, and the quite modern music of one of the most advanced composers of the time, writing in 1969: at least four time-periods in all.

8. Freddie Mercury

Now for something that once more takes me well outside my own knowledge base, so apologies if I get something wrong. I am going to play *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the 1975 hit written and sung by **Freddie Mercury** (1946–91), the lead singer of the band **Queen**. What makes this Postmodern? I would say the way it abandons the usual verse-and-chorus structures, but is a loose collection of strikingly different styles: you get the vocal quartet at the opening, then Mercury at the piano, punctuated by sweetly melodic instrumental solos; then the style changes again when he stands up, and changes radically when we come to the faster section about the silhouette (which has almost a *commedia dell'arte* feel), then a passage of heavy metal, before it ends as a very simple ballad. It really is amazing!

9. Freddie Mercury: *Bohemian Rhapsody*

10. Alexander Ekman

Now for my *pièce de résistance*. It is a clip from near the start of Act II of *A Swan Lake* (2010) by the Swedish choreographer **Alexander Ekman** (b.1984). In the short first act, we see his alter ego pitching an idea to an impresario about a ballet called *Swan Lake*. The impresario pooh-poohs it; human beings as swans, really? But in Act II, it begins to happen—but not at all in the way imagined by **Petipa** and **Tchaikovsky**, as you shall see, although Ekman does bring in references to the classic choreography elsewhere in the piece. I wish the composer, **Mikael Karlsson**, had made similar use of Tchaikovsky; he does write some real music in the other sections, but the accompaniment in the part I want to play is mostly percussion. All the same, Ekman's ability to totally rethink a classic trope is nothing short of brilliant!

11. Alexander Ekman: *A Swan Lake* (2010), Act II opening

12. Main title 4 (still from the above)