

CLASS 12 : MADE IN OUR CENTURY

SOME THEMES

1. Class title 1 (Crystal Pite)

The rather bemused woman on my title slide is the Canadian choreographer **Crystal Pite** (1970–). She might be saying, “Is this the 21st century? Where am I? What’s going on?” One answer is this work of hers from 2015, *The Seasons Canon*. Tell me what you make of it.

2. Crystal Pite: *The Seasons Canon* (excerpt)

3. Crystal Pite (repeat of first slide)

What was that? The music is **Max Richter’s** reworking of Vivaldi’s *Seasons*. It is the *Spring* movement, but Pite’s choreography is not all joyous. There seems to be something darker going on, some sort of mass struggle towards consciousness. I will show another Pite work at the start of the second hour too, where such mass movement is the explicit subject. Using her as a book-end is one of the ways I have tried to give a form to a class consisting entirely of work produced by women in the 21st century, illustrated largely through videos like this one. Of the four dozen works that I wanted to show, I have chosen 16, not because they are the best or most representative, but because they fitted a theme.

4. Menu slide 1

5. Menu slide 2

6. Menu slide 3

7. Menu slide 4

8. Menu slide 5

I am using a metaphor of travel. The first section, **A Backward Glance**, consists mainly of older established artists looking back at their personal past or the art of previous centuries, and placing it in a contemporary context; Pite’s recycling of Vivaldi is my first example. The second, **Missed Connections**, reflects the fact that ours is a fragmented world, with people isolated in their own silos, whether as individuals or as groups. The third section, after the break, is almost the opposite: **Travel**, reflecting the tragedy of global migration, yes, but also the possibility that people may move—whether geographically or by changing their mindset—to achieve better lives. The last is **Arrival**: what happens when people arrive from an old country to make a home in a new one; the new country in this case will be America, and most of the artists will have arrived from Africa. You will notice that I have labeled the four portraits—**Judith Weir**, **Melissa Lee-Houghton**, **Crystal Pite**, and **Njideka Akunyili Crosby**—by their discipline: music, poetry, dance, and art. I don’t mean to suggest that these are the only elements in each section, but I have tried to distribute the four media evenly throughout the class. You will find, I think, that the class as a whole has a trajectory from wistfulness through sorrow and tension to what I hope is a joyous upbeat finale!

A. A BACKWARD GLANCE

9. Section title A (Judith Weir)

The woman here is one of Britain's senior composers, **Dame Judith Weir** (1954–). Her music on the whole is fairly radical, but the particular composition I am going to play is in an unusually relaxed mood. Called *A Song of Departure*, it is a backward glance of three kinds: stylistically, in subject, and in the particular circumstances of its composition. She wrote it for the final concert of the chamber group **The Schubert Ensemble**, which was disbanding in 2018 after 35 years; that is the first backward glance. She based it on a song by **Schubert** himself, *Farewell*, in which the singer takes leave of a town where he has lived for many years, hiding his sorrows so as not to disturb its merry spirit; this is the second look back. I'll give you the first verse played in a piano transcription by **Franz Liszt** (1811–86); the pianist is **Valentina Lisista**. Then I'll go straight to Judith Weir's piece, in which she channels Schubert's style (the third backward glance), taking the music rather faster, but pausing for individual solos for each of the five instrumentalists (the same as in Schubert's *Trout Quintet*), her parting gift for musicians who have been her friends for years.

10. Schubert-Liszt: *Abschied*, opening

11. Judith Weir: *A Song of Departure*

12. Carol Ann Duffy and Alice Oswald

Let's stay in Britain for the moment, but shift to poetry. These two women have, or had, the two top poetry jobs in Britain. Until she resigned in 2019, the Scotswoman **Carol Ann Duffy** (1955–) was Poet Laureate. In that same year, **Alice Oswald** (1966–) became Professor of Poetry at Oxford. In the same year, 2011, each published a poem of glancing backwards; Duffy to her memories of her mother, who had recently died; and Oswald back through many millennia to the world of Homer's *Iliad*. Let's start with the Duffy. As she will explain, it starts with her mother's death and runs time backwards.

13. Carol Ann Duffy: *Premonitions* (introduced and read by the author)

14. — excerpt from the above, text

Here are two stanzas from the middle. Do you see what's going on? By moving time backwards, every stage in the horrible process of a person slipping into death becomes instead a gift, a blessing.

15. Alice Oswald: *Memorial*, book cover

16. Alice Oswald: *Memorial*, sample page opening

Alice Oswald's *Memorial* is, as its title page says, "A Version of Homer's *Iliad*." Rather than tell the story, she has cut it down to a list of all the people killed, brief bios of each of them, and a number of Homeric similes. The list of names occupies the first eight pages, rather like the names on the Vietnam War Memorial. The biographies occur only once for each dead hero, but the similes thread in and out of the pattern, often repeated exactly, like some kind of refrain. This should enable you to follow what is going on as she reads the opening of the book.

17. Alice Oswald: *Memorial*, opening

18. *Memorial* in Australia

Did you make anything of this? There was a stage production of *Memorial* in Australia, which toured internationally. I will put a link to its trailer on the website, but now I want simply to focus on the words, and Oswald reading them. Here she recounts the last death of all, that of **Hector**.

19. Alice Oswald: *Memorial*, death of Hector

B. MISSED CONNECTIONS

20. Section title B: Melissa Lee-Houghton

In this segment, I want to delve into art that reflects the dark and uncertain side of the times we live in. Three of the four items play out on a world stage, as it were, with a certain amount of energy, but this first one—a poem called *Beautiful Bodies* by yet another English poet, **Melissa Lee-Houghton** (1982–)—inhabits the deep recesses of her soul. She has been selected as a **Next Generation Poet** by the Poetry Society, and has won many prizes, but her personal life has been marked by childhood abuse, bipolar disorder, and addiction to the drugs that were supposed to address it. I warn you that this will be the emotional low point of the entire class, but ever since hearing it, I have been haunted by her words and voice. Though I don't understand it all, I have a sense that it is also saying something very true about being a woman at the mercy of men. Does it?

21. Melissa Lee-Houghton: *Beautiful Bodies*

22. — text of the above (last part)

What do you think? In most of the rest of the course, I have shown women triumphing, doing much the same things that men were doing, though often with a feminine twist. This one occupies a different territory, one that is usually kept hidden but absolutely a female one—and valuable if for that alone.

23. Pina Bausch (1940–2009), with scene from *Vollmond* (2006)

I am zooming out now from my concentration on Britain to look at two artists from continental Europe plus a third who was born in Korea but moved to Berlin. The first is the veteran choreographer **Pina Bausch** (1940–2009), whose company *Tanztheater Wuppertal* has been for years been ground-zero for contemporary dance theater in Europe. This is a scene from her last large-scale work, *Vollmond* (2006). It is a full evening work, so I may not be justified in taking it out of context. But it strikes me that in its dominant elements—the darkness, that huge black rock, the circling cripples, the falling rain—it occupies much the same world of depression as Melissa Lee-Houghton. But then, unexpectedly for a ballet, the dancer speaks....

24. Pina Bausch: *Vollmond*, excerpt

25. Berlinde de Bruyckere: *In Flanders Fields* (2000)

Talking of dark, disturbing images, what do you think of this? It is one of a series created in 2000 by the Flemish sculptor **Berlinde de Bruyckere** [rhyming with *biker-uh*] (1964–). The series is called *In Flanders Fields*, which is the first line of a WW1 poem by John McCrae: *In Flanders fields the poppies blow, Between the crosses, row on row.*” Only Bruyckere depicts victims whose bodies are not marked by rows of crosses, and no one comes to mourn: the slaughtered horses. I might as easily have included this in my section on backward glances.

26. Berlinde de Bruyckere: *Archangels* (2020)

Here is another series, produced quite recently, during the pandemic. Though called *Archangels*, they look almost as sinister as the horses. Yet if you hear her explain them, you will find that her impulse was one of consolation and rescue.

27. Berlinde de Bruyckere interview

28. Berlinde de Bruyckere: *Speaking* (2000)

What message do you get from this? Dating from the turn of the century, it represents two people speaking; I assumed a man and a woman, but realize that we can’t tell. But what is the effect of the blankets: security, vulnerability, or both?

29. Unsuk Chin

To end this hour with something a bit more upbeat, but at the same time perfectly reflecting the fractured times in which we live, let’s watch part of the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party scene from *Alice in Wonderland* (2007) by South Korean composer **Unsuk Chin** (1961–), who now lives in Berlin. You might also call this a “backward glance,” since Lewis Carroll’s original text comes from the Victorian era. But Chin and her co-librettist **David Henry Hwang** develop Carroll’s absurdity even further. So they take his parody of “Twinkle, twinkle, little star,” and pile their parody on his with wild abandon! In the staging at Munich, Alice (Sally Matthews) is the only singer who gets to move around; all the others are in boxes at the front of the stage; the picture-in-picture juxtapositions on the video are the work of the director.

30. Unsuk Chin: *Alice in Wonderland*, end of tea party scene

31. Class title 2 (In a Crazy World)

C. TRAVEL

32. World map 1

33. World map 2

At the beginning of this class, I was focusing on work being produced in Great Britain, Belgium, and Germany. With **Unsuik Chin**, I came to an artist who traveled between continents to do the bulk of her work. The majority of artists in this second hour will also be travelers. [I am making this map before finally deciding which artists to feature, so not all these arrows will represent things that I show, but you get the point!]

34. Section title C: Travel (Crystal Pite)

Actually, you have already seen this woman, **Crystal Pite**. She made *The Seasons Canon*, with which I opened, and traveled from Vancouver to Paris to do it. But the work I want to focus on now is one that she made for the Royal Ballet in 2016. Called *Flight Pattern*, it addresses travel as its subject, not as a matter of individual decisions but the forced migration of large groups, very much a tragedy of our time. He she is talking about it with marvelous honesty in rehearsal.

35. Crystal Pite on *Flight Pattern*

I compiled some clips from this a couple of years ago; I'll show it again now, though I'm afraid the joins are very obvious. It's also hard to see, so we'll need the room completely dark. You will see that Pite has taken the wavelike movements she developed for *The Seasons Canon* and used them in a far darker context here. We then cut to a bereft mother weeping over her baby. Soon, she is taking on the burdens of every other mother in the group, and falls under their weight. But then a miracle happens, as everyone else rushes in to support her. I am sorry not to be able to play the whole 30-minute work. The music is the Symphony No. 3 (*Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*) by **Henryk Gorecki**.

36. Crystal Pite: *Flight Pattern* (2016), excerpts

37. — still from the above

What did you think of that? I find it very moving indeed, and I love the explosion of energy at the end. I promise we will also enjoy a rise in positive energy from here on out!

38. Roxanna Panufnik

This is the English composer **Roxanna Panufnik** (1968–). Born in London in 1968, she is the daughter of composer-conductor Andrzej Panufnik, who defected from Communist Poland in 1954, so there is a history of migration there too. I will play part of her work *Three Paths to Peace* (2014), written by the World Orchestra for Peace and premiered in Jerusalem. The orchestra, which was founded by **Georg Solti**, combines musicians from Christian, Jewish, and Islamic backgrounds, representing the three Abrahamic faiths. Similarly, Panufnik's piece combines elements of the three musical traditions which can be heard in the solos for string instruments at the beginning. The conductor is Valery Gergiev, a

Russian. Since he is a prominent supporter of Putin, the orchestra severed connection with him following the invasion of Ukraine, but this concert took place before that. We shall hear the first half.

39. Roxanna Panufnik: *Three Paths to Peace* (2014), first half

40. Mona Hatoum

A woman looking at hanging strands of barbed wire. This is part of a sculpture, *Impenetrable* (1999), and the woman is the artist, **Mona Hatoum** (1952–). She is doubly an exile. She was born in Beirut, Lebanon, but as her parents were Palestinian refugees, she does not qualify for a Lebanese passport. She emigrated to London in 1975 to escape the Lebanese Civil War, and is now a British citizen. You will find themes of danger and entrapment running through her work. Some of this is on the global scale—literally: the large globe you will see at the beginning of this interview is called *Hot Spot*, implying that the whole world is a danger zone. But you will also see her transforming everyday household objects into threats. And as she talks about her journeys to create site-specific works around the world, you will hear another aspect of the theme of Travel.

41. Mona Hatoum interview

42. Katarina Janeckova Walshe: *Thoughts on Freedom* (2022)

Here is a very recent painting by the artist shown here, **Katarina Janeckova Walshe** (1988–), a Slovakian artist who married an American and relocated to Corpus Christi, Texas. It is called *Thoughts on Freedom* (2022); what do you think she means? I'll let her explain for herself in the video *Secrets of a Happy Household*. To what extent, do you think, is her title ironical?

43. Katarina Janeckova Walshe: *Secrets of a Happy Household*

D. ARRIVAL

44. Section title D: Arrival (Njideka Akunyili Crosby)

45. Njideka Akunyili Crosby: *Bedroom Scene*

That video on Katarina Janeckova Walshe might equally well have been the first item in my last segment, **Arrival**. But I want to use it entirely for *Black* artists in this country: one who emigrated, three who travel back and forth, and one whose ancestors came years ago against their will. The one who emigrated is this artist, **Njideka Akunyili Crosby** (1983–), who also married a white American. She grew up in Nigeria, but her mother won a green-card lottery, enabling Njideka to study in the US. She enrolled in the pre-med program at Swarthmore, took a painting class on the side (her first), and realized that this was more important to her than organic chemistry and biology. So she studied art in Philadelphia and later at Yale. Sometime (I'm not sure when), she met and married fellow artist Justin Crosby, and moved with him to Los Angeles, where she has continued to work. Her style, which combines painting and collage, traditional Nigerian elements, and American realism, has won her a "genius award" from the MacArthur Foundation. One of her paintings recently resold for \$3.4 million at Sotheby's. I have put together a short montage of her work, set against the song *Beautiful* by Black American **Imani Uzuri** (bdnk).

46. Njideka Akunyili Crosby montage

47. Warsan Shire

Back to poetry. This is **Warsan Shire** (1988–). It is a similar story of international travels. She was born in Kenya to parents who emigrated from Somalia. While still a child, they took her to London, where she grew up; she was selected in 2013 as **Young Poet Laureate of London**. However, in 2015, she relocated to Los Angeles, and it was there she had her major breakthrough. The singer **Beyoncé**, entranced by her poem *For Women Who Are Difficult To Love*, which she published online, asked Warsan to collaborate on a set of poems used between number in her 2016 video album *Lemonade*. Here is one of them.

48. Warsan Shire: *Redemption* (from *Beyoncé's Lemonade*)

49. Nkeiru Okoye

The travel story behind this face is a little different. This is the composer **Nkeiru Okoye** (1972–). She was born in New York to an African American mother and Nigerian father; she spent a lot of her childhood in Africa and continues to return. She is therefore a different kind of Black artist, whose African roots are mixed, partaking both of the past and the present day. I think you can hear the complexity in her music, such as this 2020 piece called *Black Bottom*; I'll play the first movement, *Shout*. As you listen, think what about it is American, and what comes from somewhere else.

50. Nkeiru Okoye: *Shout* (from *Black Bottom*)

51. Nkeiru Okoye (repeat)

So is it American or something else? The title and the big-band feel goes back to the 1920s. The opening sound made by that fabulous soprano sounds awfully like a police or ambulance siren. Yet the rhythm, the bongos in the orchestra, and the nature of the singing—she is right to call it “shout”—hardly sound American at all. I assume they are African.

52. Amanda Gorman and Sherrie Silver

Here, finally, are two young Black women, both in their twenties. You will remember **Amanda Gorman** (1998–) from Joe Biden's inauguration; the youngest-ever poet celebrating one of the oldest presidents.

53. Amanda Gorman: *The Hill we Climb* (Biden inauguration, opening)

54. Amanda Gorman and Sherrie Silver (repeat)

Born to a single mother in Oakland, Gorman prospered as a student and won a scholarship to Harvard. She was **Young Poet Laureate** of LA in 2016, and the position of **National Young Poet Laureate** was established for her in 2017. Choreographer **Sherrie Silver** (bdnk), however, was born in Rwanda and travels between there and the US, making music videos here and ploughing the profits back in her home country by holding street workshops and giving away free health insurance. There is a rather unctuous video on her philanthropic work, but videos of her actually getting people to dance are much more fun, despite the re-pe-ti-tious music!

55. Sherrie Silver: *Rwanda dance video* (part)

56. Amanda Gorman and Sherrie Silver at 2019 Women of the World summit

So let's end with a video of them both together, at the opening of the **Women of the World Summit** in 2019. I wouldn't say these are the greatest performances of the class, as both the poem and the dance were clearly created to deliver inspiring political messages that the invited delegates wanted to hear. But all the same, to bring two such young talents together, from two different continents, and with a message that has in effect been the theme of the entire course, that must be worth something!

57. Amada Gorman and Sherrie Silver at 2019 Women of the World summit

58. Class title 3: Women of the World