Class 1: The Sound of Words

A. The Music of Poetry

1. Section title A (Poetry/Music Spiral)

This class will take the form of a **prologue and five short acts**. The acts are previews of the five remaining classes, showing different ways in which poetry and music are linked, as the spiral here suggests. But in this prologue, I want to make a very simple point: that poetry has music in itself. I'll do this by playing you the opening sections of two poems. Since I want you to listen to them as **sound**, I have chosen things whose meaning you probably won't take in at first hearing: a snatch of **TS Eliot** and a poem by **Baudelaire** in French. So here is the opening of *Burn Norton*, the first of the *Four Quartets* by **TS Eliot** (1888–1965): the first eight lines, read by **Alec Guinness**. I'll play them three times. Don't worry about the words at first; just listen to the sound of his voice. Then I'll add the text, and an appropriate picture after that. Afterwards, I'll want you to tell me what each addition does for you.

2. TS Eliot: *Four Quartets*, opening of *Burnt Norton*, read by Alec Guinness

So what did that do for you? Were you able to listen to the words as sound alone, without trying to parse them? Once you could see the words, did that enhance the sound or get in its way? And did the addition of *Persistence of Memory* (1931) by **Salvador Dalí** (1904–89) add or subtract anything? I'll give you a slightly longer version of this excerpt in a moment, but first I want to consider what various other people have said about the interconnection between Poetry, Music, and Painting.

3. William Blake quote
4. Paul Valéry quote
5. Joan Miro quote
6. Leonardo da Vinci quote
7. — all of the above together

So here we have **William Blake** (1757–1827) calling *Poetry, Painting & Music the three Powers in man of conversing with Paradise, which the flood did not sweep away*. **Paul Valéry** (1871–1945) giving second place to his own art, calling Poetry *Music dragged down to the level of speech.* The Spanish painter **Joan Miró** (1893–1983) linking both Poetry and Music to Painting, saying *I try to apply colors like words that shape poems, like notes that shape music.* And **Leonardo da Vinci** (1452–1519) talking about both Poetry and Painting when he said *Painting is poetry that is seen rather than heard, and poetry is painting that is heard rather than seen* ["heard" or "felt"; the Italian word *sentito* means both.]

Might Leonardo as well have said Music rather than Poetry? Perhaps. But look at this lovely sonnet by **WH Auden** (1907–73). He says that Music is unique, an "absolute gift" independent of the real world:

8. WH Auden: "The Composer"

To look at poetry, music, and the visual together, let's go back to the Eliot. Here the opening of *Burnt Norton* in a rather longer video that I found on line by someone calling herself **Satty VerbArt**. She too is musical, though in a different key from Guinness. She adds some actual music, a piano piece that I cannot identify. And she adds a sequence of visual images with quite some skill. So watch and listen, and again tell me how you think each of the images works (or doesn't work) together.

9. TS Eliot: *Four Quartets*, opening of *Burnt Norton*, tribute video by Satty VerbArt

What did you think the music did there? To my mind, it was superfluous, taking away from the music of the poem itself. And what about the visual images? Personally I felt they helped, by being concrete but not *too* literal. Although this course is about Poetry and Music, the visual arts will inevitably come in as well, so let's think about them.

10. Diagram: Poetry, meaning, mood, and form

When I started to sketch this diagram, I was about to say that Poetry comes from the confluence of **Music** and **Meaning**; the words mean something concrete, but they also have a sound; somehow the poet balances the actual with the abstract. But then thinking about the Eliot, I realized that the music in poetry is partly a matter of **Mood**, but partly also a matter of **Form**: the rhythms, the repetitions, the perceived shape—and form is pure music. So thinking where the visual and the auditory might go on this diagram, I realized that music deals with both form and mood, while painting (or the visual generally) deals with meaning, but also (in the right hands) with mood.

11. Courbet: *Charles Baudelaire*

I want to try the experiment of listening to Poetry as Music one more time. This time, I am going to use a poem in French, the opening stanza of "Invitation to the Voyage" from *Les fleurs du Mal* (1857) by **Charles Baudelaire** (1821–67). I'll give you the words, just to have something on the screen, but I won't translate them yet. Again, I want you to listen rather than trying to work out what the words mean.

12. Baudelaire: "*L'invitation au voyage*." Opening, read by Dana Andreea Nigrim

The reader was **Dana Andreea Nigrim**. It sounds almost like a lullaby, doesn't it, whispered, suggestive. Here is the text, as translated by **William Aggeler**:

13. Baudelaire: "L'invitation au voyage." Opening, translated by William Aggeler

The painting was a portrait of the poet by his friend **Gustave Courbet** (1819–77). Another painter inspired by the poet was **Henri Matisse** (1869–1954), who in 1904 painted an evocation of Baudelaire's refrain line, "*Luxe, calme, et volupté*." I'm focusing slowly, so as to give you the mood before the detail.

14. Matisse: *Luxe, calme, et volputé* (1904, Paris, Orsay)

It is a very famous line from a very famous poem. Not surprisingly, it has been set to music many times. Here is the same first stanza in the versions by **Henri Duparc** (1848–1933) as sung by the great French baritone, **Gérard Souzay**, and the popular singer **Léo Ferré** (1916–93). Let's compare them, asking two

questions: Does the composer enhance the latent music of the poem or compete with it? And, in this particular case, how does he handle that refrain? [From time to time, incidentally, I will show you clips with the printed music, because some people might appreciate it, but I do know that not all of you will be able to follow the score.]

15. Duparc: "L'invitation au voyage." Gérard Souzay
16. Ferré: "L'invitation au voyage." Léo Ferré

B. The Sacred in Text and Song

17. Course/class menu

All that was a prologue, simply to make the point that, although I have called the course "Poetry in Music," I might equally well have called it "The Music in Poetry." The rest of this class, as I said, will be a brief preview of the remaining 5 classes, which deal with various ways in which poetry and music have interconnected over the last milennium; the organization is vaguely chronological, but only vaguely so.

18. Section title B: The Sacred in Text and Song

Religion has been expressed in poetry from earliest times. Even the laws and statistics in the first books of the Hebrew Bible have a rhythm to them, and both the *Psalms* of David and *The Song of Solomon* are overtly poetic. Christian liturgy makes use of medieval poems such as the *Magnificat,* the *Song of Simeon*, and the *Dies Irae*. Music like the chant shown here grew out of the poetry, partly as a way of synchronizing and pacing communal devotions, partly as a way of making it audible in vast spaces—by which I mean both the literal space in an abbey or cathedral, and the interstellar space between earth and heaven. I'll glance at **cantillation** in other religions briefly in next week's class. For now, I want to play you two examples of the Gregorian Plainchant that developed during the 9th and 10th centuries, and continued through the Middle Ages. Here are two examples: the one sung by a male choir, much as the medieval monks might have done, the other executed in concert by a trio of women (yes, nuns sang plainchant also). I'll tell you more after we have heard them, but for now I want you to listen for two things: how many singers do you think we are hearing, and how many separate musical lines?

19. Etienne de Liège: *Deum verum*, performed by Psallentes
20. Trio Medieval: *A Worcester Ladymass*
21. — attributions of the above

What did you hear: how many singers, how many musical lines? The first was written by **Etienne de Liège** (850–920) around 900; the second comes from fragments preserved in Worcester Cathedral from around 1400. Both are intended for ritual use, though probably for special occasions. Both are chant, in that the speed and duration of notes is not measured. The earlier version is basically **monophonic**, or written for a single unaccompanied vocal line, though there are five singers in the group. There is a moment where two parts separate, but the lower one is simply singing the same notes in parallel, an octave or fifth down. Most of the Worcester music, though, involves more than one voice, and was sung

here by a trio; while it can still be used in a sacramental context, this is taking an important step towards music that can stand alone—as indeed it is now doing.

One more point. In most of what I shall show you later, poetry and music are linked by **rhythm**. But plainchant is the one musical form in which rhythm is almost irrelevant. Or rather, its rhythm is that of the human breath; it has nothing to do with the ticking of a clock.

C. Songs of the People

22. Section title C: MS of "Sumer is icumen in"
23. "Sumer is icumen in," translation

Here is another piece of medieval music, but it is not anything you would hear in church. No, it is the music for the traditional rhyme "Sumer is icumen in," a down-to-earth description of the coming of Spring. You get not only the tune, but instructions for singing it as a round —which is what you get here, in a recording by the **Hilliard Ensemble**.

24. "Sumer is icumen in," Hilliard Ensemble
25. "Sumer is icumen in," Oxford Book of English Verse

This is the first poem in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, which confidently sets the date as c.1226. But this is probably only the date when it was first set down in a surviving manscript; like most folk materials, it is likely to be much older. I'll give you three more. Here is another recording from the group of women you heard singing the Worcester Ladymass, the Norwegian **Trio Mediaeval**. It is a Norwegian folksong called "Gjendine's Lullaby," but have you any idea of the date?

26. Trio Medieval: "Gjendine's Lullaby."
27. Trio Mediaeval, group portrait.

Date, anybody? When I came upon it on YouTube sung by the Trio Mediaeval, I assumed that it was medieval also. But in fact it is called "Gjendine's Lullaby" because a milkmaid called Gjendine sung it for **Edvard Grieg** in the nineteenth century, and he wrote it down. But there is nothing 19th-century whatsoever about the music; it may not be medieval, but it is certainly a lot older than late Romantic!

28. Pieter Bruegel: *Peasant Dance* (c.1547, Vienna)

I think it is safe to say that before there was composed music, there was the music of the people in the streets and fields. I shall devote the entire third class to this, since it has ramifications much wider than you might think. In general, we have to assume that the words and music came into existence around the same time, but often the words get changed or disappear entirely, while the tunes remain, passed down from mother to daughter or father to son.

29. Traditional: "The fox went out on a chilly night" (text)

America, especially in the Appalachian Mountains, has preserved a long tradition of folk music, in many cases older and less altered than the equivalents you would find in Britain today. The group performing my next clip, “The fox went out on a chilly night,” is a Cleveland ensemble called **Apollo’s Fire** that normally specializes in baroque music (you will see a harpsichord among the instruments), but its members can turn equally easily to the bluegrass equivalents. The singer is **Amanda Powell**. This song dates back to the 15th century. The performance makes several points:

(a) the importance in folk music of **storytelling**;
(b) the importance of **rhythm** as the quality linking verse and music; and
(c) the quality of **improvisation**, of folk music as a *living* tradition.

30. Traditional: “The fox went out on a chilly night” (Amanda Powell with Apollo’s Fire)
31. Rattle, Kozena, Berio

The words of folk songs get changed and sometimes even discarded, but the music lives on as a strangely potent flavor capsule giving a whiff of another culture in another time. The Italian *avant-garde* composer **Luciano Berio** (1925–2003) made capital of this when he wrote his *Folk Songs* in 1964, collecting songs, all in their original languages, from numerous countries (including Appalachia), and arranging them for soprano with small chamber ensemble. I will play more in a later class, but for now I want to leave you with the haunting Armenian melody *Loosin Yelav*. I believe it is about the rising of the moon, but other than that I am just content to listen. The singer is **Magdalena Kožená**, and the hardly-needed conductor is her husband, **Sir Simon Rattle**.

32. Berio: “Loosin Yelav” from Folk Songs.
33. Class title 2 (Maria Strutz, *Fox and Moon*)

D. Songs of the Poets

34. Section title D (Blake: *The Sick Rose*)

My next section, and the fourth class, will be devoted to vocal settings of the work of poets who publish their poetry in its own right. The usual term for this, **Art Song**, may be a little pretentious, but it makes the point that we are dealing with the marriage of two separate artists, the poet and the composer. Indeed, on the poet's part, it may well be polygamy, since a great poem may be set by numerous composers (as we have seen with Baudelaire) whereas the composer's work belongs to that text only.

35. Moritz von Schwind: *Der Erlkönig* (1830, Vienna Belvedere)

I remarked that **storytelling** is an important part of the folk tradition. From the times of Homer and Beowulf onwards, it has also been an essential part of the literary one. And although the focus of the Romantic era turned more to shorter lyrical works, the **narrative ballad** still makes an appearance. One such as the *Elkönig* of by **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** (1749–1832), written in 1782. Here is the first half (I no spoilers for the second!) in a translation by **Richard Wilbur**. Goethe tells the story almost like a play-script, for Narrator and three characters. There is the **Father**, riding home with his child in his arms. There is his young **Son**. And there is the **Erl King**, or forest wizard, who tries to seduce the boy away from his father. I have color-coded the various voices here.

36. Goethe: *Der Erlkönig*, translation by Richard Wilbur (adapted)

The most famous setting is the one from 1815 by **Franz Schubert** (1797–1828). Schubert uses one voice only, but he depicts the characters brilliantly. The father is set very low in the singer's range. The Boy is set high, and it gets higher and higher with each entry. The Erl King is given lyrical, seductive music, which provides the only break from the relentlessly pounding hoofbeats that accompany the Narrator and continue almost throughout. The singer is **Matthias Goerne** with **Andreas Haefliger** playing the fiendishly difficult piano part.

37. Schubert "Der Erlkönig" (Goerne/Häfliger)
38. Blake: *The Sick Rose*, hand-tinted print

But there were poets in English too, of course, so let me turn to "The Sick Rose" by **William Blake** (1757–1827), from his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), published in his own full-color manuscript. We will hear it read, then in the setting by **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76). This is part of his *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings* (1943). Called "Elegy," it is the central number in the cycle, where the very simple vocal setting of the text is framed by two extended horn solos—showing that composers can respond to poetry, not only by setting it, but also in purely instrumental terms. The performers are: **Nicholas Phan** (tenor), **John Thurgood** (horn), and **Ralf Gothoni** (conductor).

39. William Blake: "The Sick Rose," read by Martin Harris
40. Britten: *Serenade for Tenor Horn and Strings*: Elegy.
41. Samy Moussa

Britten expands on simple text-setting by writing those long solos for the horn. In this setting of the same poem, the French-Canadian composer **Samy Moussa** (b.1984) dwells on single syllables, making the voice itself into an instrument. This video by Christian Morgenstern adds suggestions of a story; like the TS Eliot video we saw earlier, though, he wisely refrains from being too precise. But an interesting question: is this narrative derived from the poem, from the music, or superimposed on both?

42. Samy Moussa: *The Sick Rose*. Music video by Christian Morgenstern.

E. Conversations Between the Arts

43. Section title E (Denis: *The Muses*)

The fifth class will offer a different variation on the relationship between poetry and music; not so much a marriage, more of an affair or even a crush. It's what you get when an artist in one medium responds to the other at a distance *without* actually incorporating it. Britten's setting of the songs in his *Serenade* is traditional text-setting, but his two horn solos are wordless instrumental responses. Many of the Romantic composers, especially, gave literary titles to their piano pieces; we'll listen to a couple of these in the class itself.

44. Chopin, Mendelssohn, Schumann

Just as composers need not set a poem for voice in order to respond to it, so poets can also respond to music that we *don't* hear. One of the inspirations for this course is a marvelous collection (out of print, but still obtainable used) called *The Music Lover's Poetry Anthology*, edited by **Helen Handley Houghton** and **Maureen McCarthy Draper**. Many of the poems I shall use in this course come from it, but right now I want to focus on two of them. One tries to represent in print the experience of hearing jazz in performance. The other, which I'll show first, deals with classical music. It impresses me precisely because the poet, **Mary Stewart Hammond** (1940–2022), admits that nothing she writes can translate Mozart into words; it is called "*Seeing* Mozart's Piano Quartet in E-flat Major in the Old Whaling Church, Edgartown," *not* hearing it. But in not hearing, the poet is enabling us to imagine other aspects of the concert: the setting, the community, the players as people, and other absences that will occur before the year is out.

45. Old Whaling Church, Edgartown, Martha's Vineyard, MA

I have sent you a copy of the poem. I could not find a video performance of the **Mozart** by a good all-female quartet, let alone comprised of older community players who make mistakes, but I have found a student group from the New England Conservatory that has at least has three women! However, I shall read the poem in silence, because it is about *not* hearing the music, but then give you these young women as they reach the end of the first movement.

46. Mozart: *Piano Quartet #2 in E-flat Major* (opening, for Hammond poem)
47. Cover of *Kind of Blue*

My other poem about music is *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**.

48. Davis/Schulman: *Blue in Green*

F. Words for Music

49. Section title F (shot from *Hamilton*)

Finally, a section on words written especially for music—words that the poet write in order to inspire a composer, or a composer writes for himself. Much of my class on this (the sixth and last) will concentrate on the **American Songbook** and the music of Broadway, but there is one oddity I want to mention first, if time: *Façade, an Entertainment.* This was a series of poems written by the eccentric and well-connected English poet **Edith Sitwell** (1887–1964) to be, not sung, but *recited* against music composed by the young **William Walton** (1902–83) in 1923. The poems are mainly written for sound and rhythm. They make sense of a kind in units of a few lines at a time, but they are essentially abstract. Their only purpose is to make exciting and highly colorful verbal music.

50. Sitwell: *Tango-Pasodoble*, from *Façade* (text, which I'll read in part)
51. Walton: Tango-Pasodoble, from Façade (Stephanie Blythe and Raymond Menard)
52. Cole Porter and Lin-Manuel Miranda

Once we get into the great American lyricists, we have so many—**Ira Gershwin**, **Cole Porter**, **Oscar Hammerstein**, **Stephen Sondheim**—and often their words are as clever as the music, which they often wrote themselves; indeed the two cannot be separated. I will do a lot more on this in the last class, after I have had more time to think about it. But for now, I want to end with two samples. First**, Cole Porter** (1891–1964) singing his own "You're the top" from the musical *Anything Goes* (1934), and second, the opening scene of the 2015 mega-hit, *Hamilton*, by **Lin-Manuel Miranda** (b.1980), which transports Rap from street to stage. I am struck by the way something that starts as speech—albeit in rhyme—turns into a full-scale musical number almost without you knowing it. And here, of course, the marriage of poetry and music is entirely within the brain of Miranda himself, who wrote both!

53. Cole Porter: "You're the top" from *Anything Goes*
54. Lin-Manuel Miranda: *Hamilton* (opening number)
55. Class title 3 (*Hamilton*)