



POETRY in MUSIC

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Class 3: Songs of the People

A. From the Middle Ages

Folk song, at least until the modern era, could be defined as texts and tunes without known authors, passed on by oral tradition. So even if manuscripts exist for some early songs, it is likely that they emerged earlier still.

- **Anon: *Sumer is icumen in*.** Repeat from Class 1. Sung by the Hilliard Singers.
- **Anon: *Green grow the rushes, O*.** Counting song. King Solomon's Singers.
- **Traditional: *Echad Mi Nodea*.** Passover counting song.
- **Burns: *Green grow the rashes, O*.** Song in the folk style, on the same refrain. Words and music by Robert Burns (1784). The Band of Burns.

B. Ballads and Story Songs

Ballads about love—or loss of love—are staple fare for folksong. As are songs that tell stories, a tradition going back to the beginnings of literature.

- **Traditional, arr. Britten: *O waly, waly*.** Song text probably from Scotland; tune collected by Cecil Sharp in Somerset. Sung by Kathleen Ferrier. [Note: this version begins with the words “The water is wide,” and does not contain the “O waly, waly” verse that gives the song its name.]
- **Traditional: *Barbara Allen*.** A story song with many variants. Sung by Andreas Scholl and, in an Appalachian version, by Jean Ritchie.

C. Sea Shanties and Work Songs

Sailors sang songs to help them keep pace or otherwise endure repetitive work. The words might reflect recent events or the travels from port to port; they may be nostalgic, thinking of home; and they could often be ribald, typical of men long deprived of female company.

- **Traditional: *Boney was a warrior*.** The story of Napoleon, with the refrain “A warrior, a terrier, John François.” Sung by Paul Clayton.
- **Malcolm Arnold: *Three Shanties for Wind Quintet*.** End of the second movement (Boney) and beginning of the third (Hilo). Omega Quintet.

- **Traditional: *Johnny come down to Hilo*.** Work song, probably originally in black-inflected English, but also in other versions. Fisherman's Friends.
- **Traditional: *It's a long John*.** Work song in the statement/response pattern, recorded from a prison chain gang in 1934.

D. Some Spirituals

The spirituals of slaves in America are often also work songs, songs of suffering—and songs of hope, turning towards the Christian faith. The arrangements we generally hear nowadays often obscure their original context.

- **Traditional: *The Gospel Train*.** As sung by the US Navy Sea Chanters.
- **Traditional: *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.** From the movie *12 Years a Slave*.

E. Protest Songs

The revival of interest in folk music in the mid-20th century was accompanied by a generation of singer-songwriters writing songs in the folk style: simple ballad forms, sung with a deliberate avoidance of concert-hall polish, played on acoustic instruments, and music that supports the sentiment of the words. And those words were often songs of protest, songs that addressed the issues of the day, such as the Vietnam War, and social inequality. If Bob Dylan had been a musician in any other field, it would make no sense that he should win the Nobel Prize for *Literature*, but as a folk musician—and given the political leanings of the Nobel committee, it does have a certain logic.

- **Bob Dylan: *Blowin' in the Wind*.**

F. Folksongs for Orchestra

The 20th-century renaissance in British music owed a lot to the folk songs collected by Cecil Sharp, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, and their contemporaries. We hear how one song, *High Germany*, is used by each.

- **Sharp: *High Germany*,** sung by Martin Carthy.
- **Holst: *Somerset Rhapsody* (1907).** The “High Germany” section in a band arrangement, all the instruments played by Sam Vanderwoude.
- **Vaughan Williams: *Folk Songs from Somerset*,** the last movement of his *Folk Song Suite* (1923). Orchestra of Saint Martins in the Fields.

G. Folksong Onstage

The Beggar's Opera, which took London by storm in 1728, created the new genre of Ballad Opera. The play, by John Gay, is original; the music, however, is all borrowed from folk songs, popular airs of the day, or outright stolen. And towards the end of the 19th century, opera composers in Eastern Europe began to turn to folksong as a badge of authenticity, especially in contexts emphasizing peasant culture or closeness to the land

- **Gay/Pepusch: *The Beggar's Opera*,** excerpts. (Film by Peter Brook, 1953., with Laurence Olivier and Dorothy Tutin).
- **Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin* (1879).** Act I, scene 1. Country folk pay tribute to the landowner, Mme Larina. Metropolitan Opera, d. Deborah Warner.
- **Janacek: *Jenufa* (1904).** Act I. The drunken Steva calls for a folk song to give his fiancée Jenufa a hard time. Teatro Real, Madrid. Amanda Roocroft (Jenufa), Nikolai Shukoff (Steva); c. Ivor Bolton.

H. Folksong in Recital

And folksong has proved a boon to the eclecticism of composers in the late 20th century and in our own time, no longer expressing the nationality of the composer, but offering rich color and the possibility of new sounds.

- **Osvaldo Golijov: *Ayre* (2004),** opening number, *Mañanita de San Juan*. Sephardic song from the middle ages. Ilana Davidson and ensemble.
- **Luciano Berio: *Folk Songs* (1964),** final number, *Azerbaijani Love Song*. An Azerbaijani folk song taken from an old 78 rpm record and transcribed phonetically, with no idea what the text means! Cathy Berberian with Luciano Berio, her husband.

Malcolm **Arnold** (1921–2006, *English composer*), Luciano **Berio** (1925–2003, *Italian composer*), Benjamin **Britten** (1913–76, *English composer*), Robert **Burns** (1759–96, *Scottish poet*), Bob **Dylan** (b.1941, *American singer-songwriter*), John **Gay** (1685–1732, *English poet*), Osvaldo **Golijov** (b.1960, *Argentinian composer*), Gustav **Holst** (1874–1934, *English composer*), Leos **Janacek** (1854–1928, *Czech composer*), Cecil **Sharp** (1859–1924, *English folksong collector*), Pyotr Ilyich **Tchaikovsky** (1840–93, *Russian composer*), Ralph **Vaughan Williams** (1872–1958, *English composer*)