

Class 4: Songs of the Poets

A. Shakespeare's Songs

1. Title Slide (Blake: *London*)

Last week, I considered folk songs, with no known poet or composer. Two weeks from now, I shall be looking at songs in which a specific poet writes for a specific composer, sometimes even one and the same person. Today, I want to think about composers setting texts written before their time by poets who either did not intend them to be set to music, or at least not by them. To compress a vast field, I shall be considering only English-speaking composers (though not only from English texts). The first half will be devoted to British composers, the second half to American ones.

2. Menu slide

Looking through the song repertoire, you find that some poets get set to music repeatedly, while others are seldom set at all. I want to ask why. **What is it about a particular piece of verse—or even prose—that seems to beg for music, while other equally fine writing does not?**

3. Section title A (Sir John Gilbert: *Who is Silvia?*)

My first category—**William Shakespeare** (1564–1616)—is pretty much a “duh” answer, because the songs in his plays were written to be sung in the first place. The comedies, especially, are studded with songs. Unfortunately, only two of the original settings survive. But that has not stopped later composers from turning to Shakespeare again and again. I want to look at two such poems: “Who is Silvia” from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun” from *Cymbeline*, and listen to two contrasted settings of each.

4. Shakespeare: “Who is Silvia?” from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, text

5. Shakespeare: “Who is Silvia?” from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (David Hart)

First, let’s hear “Who is Silvia?” read by **David Hart**, then in two versions of the famous setting by **Franz Schubert** (1797–1828). He set it in German translation, but as we want it in English our options are more limited. So here is a not-very-good video of a nonetheless splendid recital at Covent Garden by the mezzo-soprano **Janet Baker** accompanied by **Murray Perahia**. After that, I’ll play the last verse in a rather fun arrangement for the **King’s Singers**, singing unaccompanied—yes, even the notes of the piano part are sung by members of the group!

6. Schubert: “Who is Silvia?” Sung by Janet Baker

7. Schubert: “Who is Silvia?” Arranged for The King’s Singers (last verse).

It is easy to see what attracted Schubert to this, and his setting (albeit originally in German) has become iconic. What bravery for a later composer to try a different one, but clearly **Gerald Finzi** (1901–56) found

something different in it, a more youthful energy, when he included it in his cycle *Let Us Garlands Bring* in 1942. Here is **Paul Carey Jones** with **Jocelyn Freeman**. I love the piano fanfares at the end!

8. Finzi: “Who is Silvia?” Paul Carey Jones and Jocelyn Freeman.

My next example, the dirge from *Cymbeline*, is very different in mood, as it is written to be sung at a funeral; the reader here is **Dana Andreea Nigrim**, a Romanian-born vocal coach in Canada.

9. Shakespeare: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun.” Diana Andreea Nigrim.

Finzi includes the song in his *Let Us Garlands Bring*; we will hear in his later orchestral version, sung by **Michael George**. The YouTube videos of both this and the reading have quite well-chosen photographs; I will put the links online. However, since I want to concentrate on what the composer does with the *words*, I am sticking to the same slide. Note that Shakespeare has four equal stanzas; how does Finzi treat them? What does his setting add to the bare text, if anything?

10. Finzi: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun.” Sung by Michael George.

What did you think? My second version of this is as different as could be. It is from *A Renaissance Serenade* by a composer who was then a student at Peabody (indeed, we wrote a three-act opera together), **Mark Lanz Weiser** (b.1968). He wrote this for his then-girlfriend, **Charmaine Hamann**. Following settings of several other Elizabethan and Jacobean poets, he ends with this one. But there is nothing dirgelike about it. It is a burst of energy that brings the house down. I don’t think even he knows why he chose to set the poem in this way. It is totally illogical—but it works!

11. Weiser: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun.” Sung by Charmaine Hamann.

B. William Blake’s London

12. Section title B (Blake: London)

William Blake (1757–1827) published his collection of short poems in 1794 as *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. He did not write them to be sung, but they are song-like in their short regular stanzas and rhyme scheme. They also contain a lot of cutting observations about the morality of the late-18th-century world. So, for example, his sixteen-line poem “London.” When I did this class in 2018, I found a very nicely-spoken reader who got the words across, but not the sentiment. But just recently I found this clip from a BBC program in which the poem is read by a hip-hop rapper called **Testament**.

13. Blake: “London,” text

14. Blake: “London.” Read by Testament

While Blake’s moral edge might be a deterrent for composers who might otherwise have been attracted to the musical potential of these little ditties, it was the opposite for **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76), a composer with a strong social conscience. His *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* composed in 1965

makes a point of interspersing the verses with the even more pithy proverbs that occur elsewhere in Blake's work.

15. Blake: "The pride of the peacock"

Here is the first proverb, then the opening of the cycle, performed in what must be a Covid-era filming by baritone **Simon Lobelson** and pianist **Jack Symonds**. It is rather strange, but I very much like the latent vitriol that the singer makes explicit.

16. Britten: *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*, opening. Simon Lobelson.

Britten's music is difficult. What happens if you approach this text in a pop idiom? Here is a video that came upon quite accidentally on the internet. Tell me what you think of the music by **Michael Griffin**, and the artwork of **George Morton-Clark**. Blake is here being translated into *two* media, not just one.

17. Griffin: *London*. Artwork by George Morton-Clark.

What did you think? To my mind, the music is a bit blah, but I found the art very powerful.

C. Rimbaud's Illuminations

18. Section title C (Redon)

People who have taken classes with me will know that I worship **Benjamin Britten** and am fascinated by **French**, so I hope you will excuse my departure from strictly English subjects in this one instance: Benjamin Britten's setting of *Les Illuminations* by **Arthur Rimbaud** (1854–91). **But our basic question is "What makes a composer more attracted to certain texts?" and this makes an especially cogent example.** Why should a middle-class twenty-something from the English provinces pick on the work of a difficult French poet, and one moreover who wrote most of his output in prose? Part of it, I'm sure, was bravado: showing his superior culture, flaunting his ability to write in a different language. Part of it was almost certainly personal: one young homosexual genius reaching out to the legacy of another—a breakaway who ran away from school, wrote frantically until he was 21, and then abandoned literature altogether.

19. Rimbaud and Britten

But more than anything, I think, it was Rimbaud's extraordinary imagery that called out for music: its color, its sensuality, and at the same time its precision and ambiguity. And these things apply to other poets and other composers, though Rimbaud was unique. I am going to offer three pieces. I'll introduce the first two with the texts read in French by some uncredited speaker. I've put the translation up with the slides, but for now I want you to listen to the sound, and the significant difference between the two. The first, "Antique" takes the image of a Graeco-Roman statue of an hermaphrodite and brings it to life. "Royalty" is set in some balmy climate inhabited by a people so peaceful that all one has to do to become a king or queen is to say so. Listen and tell me what you hear.

20. Rimbaud: “Antique” and “Royalty,” readings

What did you hear? There is a sexual ambiguity and lazy sensuality to “Antique” that must surely have appealed to Britten. “Royalty” is a utopian fantasy. Britten captures well the entranced eroticism of the first and the playfulness of the second. I’ll play the music in a performance by the extraordinary singer **Barbara Hannigan**, who also conducts the orchestra of the French radio. She is an accomplished stage performer, so you will see every nuance reflected in her face.

21. Britten: *Les Illuminations*, “Antique” and “Royalty.” Barbara Hannigan.

22. Odilon Redon: *Apparition* (1905–10, Princeton)

So what do you think did interest Britten in these poems? To me, it is the color, which is why I think this painting by **Odilon Redon** (1840–1916) so appropriate, even though it has no direct connection to Rimbaud that I know of. Britten challenged himself, though, by writing for strings alone, so avoiding the “easy” hues of winds, brass, and percussion. I don’t find it lacks color at all.

23. Seurat: *Circus Parade* (1888, NY Met)

With my third extract, “Parade,” I shan’t bother to give you the text, as the effect will come over quite clearly in performance. It is a nightmare vision of all the strange types one sees in the sideshows of a carnival midway. **Georges Seurat** (1859–91) made it static when painting a similar scene at around the same time. But Britten builds on a little tune in the orchestra, setting the whole thing into motion in an savage march. The number ends with a phrase that occurs several times in the piece: “*J’ai seul la clé de cette parade sauvage*”—I alone have the key to this wild parade!

24. Britten: *Les Illuminations*, “Parade.” Barbara Hannigan.

25. Class title 2 (Redon detail)

D. Dickinson’s Deceptive Ditties

26. Section title D (Dickinson House, Amherst)

It struck me just now that the poetry of **Emily Dickinson** (1830–86) poetry has a lot in common with that of **William Blake**. Both write in short rhymed stanzas. Both are deceptively simple on the surface, yet can make a point of some profundity or wield a sharp sting. Both poets are deeply conscious of God and the world beyond. Consider this short poem by Dickinson, “Will there really be a morning?” The reader is **Barbara Cole**.

27. Emily Dickinson: “Will there really be a morning?” Read by Barbara Cole.

Dickinson must surely be the American poet most set to music; there are eleven different settings of this one on the first page of YouTube alone! What is it that might attract a composer? It is short, so I can give you three responses to it, and invite you to compare them. The first is by **Ricky Ian Gordon** (b.1956), a much performed contemporary composer of art song and opera; he himself accompanies the imposing

singer **Camellia Johnson** on the piano. The song is actually repeated in its entirety after a substantial piano interlude, but you can get enough from the first time through. Then, in audio only, a very different setting by the composer-conductor **André Previn** (1929–2019); the singer is **Jamie-Rose Guarine**. And lastly **Craig Hella Johnson** (b.1962), a highly respected choral conductor who apparently also doubles as a pretty fine lounge singer; the cellist is **Biong Tsang**. This last is an interlude in a choral concert; two of the choir will join in; the rest are in the back waiting. So listen up, make notes, and let's compare.

28. Ricky Ian Gordon: “Will there really be a morning?” (Camellia Johnson)

29. André Previn: “Will there really be a morning?” (Jamie-Rose Guarine)

30. Craig Hella Johnson: “Will there really be a morning?”

31. — all three composers

What did you think? The Gordon is probably the most traditionally classical of them, but I would question whether it is too grand for Emily Dickinson's simplicity. Both the other two have inflections of popular music: jazz in Previn's case, easy listening in Johnson's: did these work for you, or did the popular aspects undercut the poetry?

32. Aaron Copland, with Dickinson recordings

Probably the best known composer of Emily Dickinson songs was **Aaron Copland** (1900–90), who wrote sets both with piano and orchestra. He visited Amherst while he was writing, getting permission to write in Emily's own studio. Here is one of the orchestral settings, “Heart, we will forget him,” sung by the incomparable soprano **Dawn Upshaw**. I don't know who made the video, but it is beautiful too. First, however, the brief poem itself, and then a recitation of it that I found online by a young woman called **April Beene**. Only some high-school student, I know, and her rendering is neither professional nor perfect. But these are sentiments that any teenager can surely make her own.

33. Emily Dickinson: “Heart, we will forget him.” Text slide

34. Emily Dickinson: “Heart, we will forget him.” Video of recitation.

35. Aaron Copland: “Heart, we will forget him,” Dawn Upshaw, Hugh Wolff, St. Paul CO.

E. James Agee's Knoxville

36. Section title E (Knoxville, old postcard)

Finally, a longer work, made from a piece of prose. Prose, though, that is full of poetry. Let me give you a sample of it, and then discuss. **James Agee** (1909–55), born in Knoxville, Tennessee, was only 5 when his father was killed in a car accident. His autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family*, which he began in 1948 but was left unfinished on his death in 1955, is partly an attempt to come to terms with that loss. It begins with a three-page prologue, entitled *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*. This was written separately from the rest in 1935, and published in 1938. Here is part of it, read by **Dean Rudoy**:

37. James Agee: *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*, read by Dean Rudoy

What is it, do you think, that calls for music there? To me, it is the space between the words, the spaces in which the memories take shape, the spaces that a composer can fill with music. Rudoy did not read the complete text, but there are passages in it that deal more explicitly with sound memories; here are a couple of them:

38. Agee: *A Death in the Family*. Some sound-pictures in the prologue.

At any rate, the composer **Samuel Barber** (1910–81) made his own selection from the text to create a 15-minute work for soprano and orchestra entitled *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*. Here it is, sung once more by **Dawn Upshaw**, with **David Zinman** conducting. I hope it was helpful to duplicate the small titles up above. The images are not mine; I found them on YouTube. But they certainly work for me!

39. Barber: *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*. Dawn Upshaw, David Zinman.

40. Class title 3 (James Agee marker)