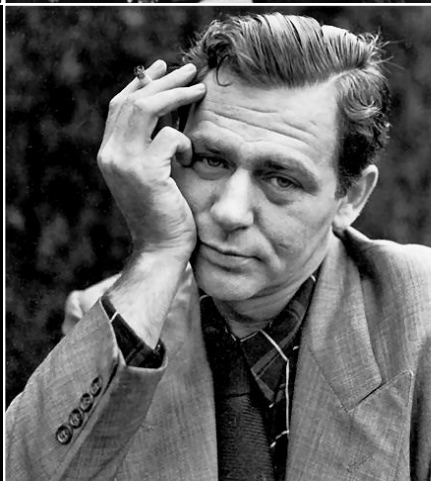


POETRY
in
MUSIC
Class 4:
March 13, 2023



POETRY in MUSIC

Class 4: Songs of the Poets

Why should some poets seldom get set to music after their death, while others are perennially popular? What is it about a text, in rhymed or free verse or even in prose, that attracts a composer? We shall look at five writers who have inspired memorable settings, and ten composers who have tackled them—from Europe in the first half, and America in the second.

A. Shakespeare's Songs

One obvious reason for musical popularity is when the poems were intended for singing in the first place. The songs scattered through Shakespeare's plays were presumably sung in performance, yet only two of the original settings survive. Nonetheless, they have continued to attract composers even today.

- **Who is Sylvia?** Song from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. We shall hear it in a reading of the play, in two performances of the setting by FRANZ SCHUBERT (with Janet Baker and the Kings Singers respectively), and another by GERALD FINZI (with Ian Bostridge).
- **Fear no more the heat o'the sun.** Dirge from *Cymbeline*. We shall hear it recited to lute accompaniment, then sung in orchestral versions by FINZI (with Paul Carey Jones) and MARK LANZ WEISER (Charmaine Hamann).

B. Blake's London

Although William Blake also wrote longer poems, his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) were written in short songlike forms. They are deceptively simple, yet they present an edgy view of contemporary morality that breaks with the convention of his time. While he is not an often-set poet, this combination of lyricism and censure has attracted some special composers.

- **London.** From *Songs of Experience*. We shall hear it read, then in the setting by BENJAMIN BRITTEN that opens his *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* (1965, Simon Lobelson and Jack Symonds), and a modern rendition by MICHAEL GRIFFIN with artwork by GEORGE MORTON-CLARK.

C. Rimbaud's Illuminations

Sticking for a while with Benjamin Britten, we come upon another mystery. Why should a young Englishman at the start of his career choose to set texts by a relatively obscure modernist Frenchman who wrote mainly in prose? Some of the reasons may have to do with personal affinities, but there are others in terms of imagery, color, and bravura that apply to other poets also.

- **Antique** and **Royalty**. Two prose-poems from *Les Illuminations* (1875). We shall see them with text and translation (by rb.), hear them read in French, and then watch the relevant section of BRITTEN'S *Les Illuminations* (1939) as performed and conducted with the French Radio Philharmonic by Barbara Hannigan.
- **Parade**. A further section of *Les Illuminations* with the continuation of the Hannigan performance of the Britten setting.

D. Dickinson's Deceptive Ditties

Emily Dickinson, whose poems were all but unknown at her death in 1886, may qualify as the American poet most often set to music. In some ways, she was similar to Blake, writing short lyrics of disarming simplicity that might easily be dismissed as naive. But there is a gap between their outward form and the personal struggles with loneliness and faith that they conceal, and in that gap there is ample room for music.

- **Will there really be a morning?** As read by Zoe Caldwell, then in settings by CRAIG HELLA JOHNSON (performed by himself with Biong Tsang, cello), ANDRÉ PREVIN (sung by Jamie-Rose Guarine with Lara Bolton), and RICKY IAN GORDON (performed by Camellia Johnson with the composer).
- **Heart, we will forget him**. Recited by an unnamed young reader, then in the orchestral setting by AARON COPLAND (Dawn Upshaw with Hugh Wolff and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra).

E. James Agee's Knoxville

Finally, the case of a composer who takes passages of prose from a novel and gives them an extended orchestral setting. James Agee did not live to complete his autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family*. The death in question is that of Agee's father, killed in a car accident when James was five. The prologue to the novel, entitled *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*, originally written in 1935, is Agee's attempt to recapture the magic of that lost

childhood. Its prose is full of sensory images—sound, sight, smell, and taste—as experienced by a young child. It reads as though the phrases are separated by ellipses... leaving the reader... or the composer... to fill in the gaps.

- **Knoxville, Summer of 1915**. From the prologue to *A Death in the Family* by James Agee. We shall here a selection read by Dean Rudoy, then the complete setting [of a slightly different selection] by SAMUEL BARBER (1948), performed by Dawn Upshaw with David Zinman conducting.



From top left, by rows: Schubert, Finzi, Weiser; Britten, Johnson, Gordon; Carter, Copland, Barber.