

# Class 5: A Conversation Among the Arts

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## A. A Rude Intrusion

### 1. Title Slide (Maurice Denis: *The Muses*)

Today, we are going to look at a variety of ways in which music and poetry (and occasionally other arts as well) may talk to one another, but largely excluding the more usual situation of the composer setting the poet's text as song. The class is called **A Conversation Among the Arts**, but it is not always a comfortable conversation, as it is conducted in two different languages.

### 2. Section title A (A Rude Interruption)

Let's start with a bit of fun. Imagine you are sitting in a concert of music by **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827), enjoying a peaceful slow movement, when suddenly...

### 3. Beethoven: *Choral Symphony*, interruption!

### 4. — still from the above

That, of course, was entirely my own confection! But just imagine. You are going to a perfectly normal Vienna concert in 1824, and have almost fallen asleep after an hour of music, when suddenly a man jumps up and declaims that he doesn't want any more of this stuff; what he wants is POETRY! And suddenly eighty singers jump to their feet and begin singing! If I were trying to reproduce that today, I'd have the bass actually come running in, and then fly out a backcloth behind the orchestra to reveal the chorus and three other soloists that you never guessed were there. Today, of course, it is advertised and you know what you are getting from the start. But just imagine if you didn't! Here is the moment of transition in an actual performance today; this is the **Chicago Symphony** under **Riccardo Muti**, with **Eric Owens** the bass soloist.

### 5. Beethoven: *Choral Symphony*, entry of the voices

### 6. — still from the above with Schiller

This is not a mere setting of a text, but an invitation for one medium to break into the sacred space previously dedicated to a quite different one. Here poetry is not so much having a conversation with music, as rudely interrupting it! With eight symphonies behind him, Beethoven felt the need to add something new to the mix. So here he is channeling the noble aspiration of **Friedrich Schiller** (1759–1805), sampling him, as it were.

## B. Dancing the Text [10:10]

### 7. Section title B (Mark Morris)

Most of the conversations in this class are between poetry and music, but I want to mention two where dancing gets into the act. The first is a work by **Mark Morris** (b.1956), *L'Allegro, il Pensieroso, ed il Moderato*, created in 1988. But first let me explain the piece on which it is based.

### 8. Handel, Milton, and Morris

We heard Schiller's *Hymn to Joy* as set by Beethoven. Another work whose subject is Joy is *L'Allegro* by **John Milton** (1608–74), which he wrote along with a contrasting ode, *Il Pensieroso*. **Georg Frideric Handel** (1685–1759) interleaved them into an oratorio, adding a third voice, *Il Moderato*, creating an alternation of lively and quiet passages. Here is a short section from the oratorio in which the tenor dismisses **Melancholy** and calls **Mirth** in its place; the orchestra bursts out into flourishes of sheer joy, as though all the birds had come out with the sun.

- 9. Handel: *L'Allegro, il Pensieroso ed il Moderato*, "Hence, loathèd Melancholy"
- 10. — text of the above

There is nothing so unusual in this; Handel wrote a large variety of oratorios, on secular subjects as well as sacred ones like the *Messiah*. But the addition of dance brings a new voice into the conversation. Morris treats his two partners differently. He stays very close to the music, but engages in joking badinage with the words. So for instance Handel's outpouring of birdsong, which derives from Milton's single mention of a lark, is developed by Morris into an exuberant section called "Birding."

- 11. Morris: *L'Allegro, il Pensieroso ed il Moderato*, "Birding"
- 12. Crystal Pite: *The Statement*, still

For something completely different, here is a still from a work that the artist shown here, Canadian choreographer **Crystal Pite** (b.1970) created in 2018. I'll explain its relevance in a moment, but first let me play you a short section without sound, and see if you can guess what the audio would be.

- 13. Crystal Pite: *The Statement*, excerpt without sound
- 14. Crystal Pite: *The Statement*, still (repeat of the above)

Any guesses? This is in fact a 20-minute dance piece set entirely to text, a recording of a radio play by **Jonathon Young**. It consists entirely of business-speak, the most mundane language you can imagine, but it is arranged as a kind of surreal poetry and builds quickly to a huge drama of power and morality. I'll play a rather longer version of what you have just seen.

- 15. Crystal Pite: *The Statement*, excerpt with sound

## C. Hidden Poetry [10:25]

### 16. Section title C (Botticelli: *Primavera*)

Poetry can lie behind a musical score, even when the words are not set to music. The earliest (1725) scores of the *Four Seasons* by **Antonio Vivaldi** (1678–1741), for instance, contain printed sonnets exactly mirroring the content of each of the twelve movements. It is not known who wrote them; the presumption is Vivaldi himself. Even so, this is a chicken-and-egg thing: did Vivaldi write the poems first and then compose music to match them, or did he write to formalize his existing musical ideas? Anyway, the parallel is quite exact; although instrumental rather than vocal, the concerti could be seen as hidden settings of their underlying poems, or as ekphrastic poetry imitating the music. But even if he wrote them, they could have been a kind of blueprint for the music that was to follow. Here is the text of the opening movement (I think in my own translation), followed by a performance of that movement by **Janine Jansen** and the **Amsterdam Sinfonietta**. It is not the most vibrant recording, but I treasure the interplay she has with her fellow musicians. And all that birdsong!

17. Vivaldi: *Spring*, sonnet in English.

18. Vivaldi: *Spring*, opening movement

19. Shivam S. “On Hearing Chopin”

A less certain, but still persistent, suggestion of hidden poetry is the possible connection between the four *Ballades* of **Frédéric Chopin** (1810–59) and the poetry of his contemporary **Adam Mickiewicz** (1798–1855). Certainly, as their name suggests, the *Ballades* do seem to tell stories, although perhaps not in a literal sense. Among the many poems on Chopin that I found online, therefore, I particularly enjoyed this one by a presumably-amateur poet. The *Second Ballade* in particular seems to be associated with Mickiewicz’s *Switezianka*, or Legend of the Mermaid of Lake Switez. The story is of a type we know well. A young man, jilted by his sweetheart, succumbs to the temptations of a mermaid from the lake, who eventually drags him down to their depths. We have not time for the whole of it, but here is a section from near the beginning: the ending of the folk-like melody with which the *Ballade* begins, the first wild outburst from the piano, and the quiet music once more.

20. Chopin: *Ballade No. 2*, excerpt.

21. Félix Mendelssohn.

But instrumental music does not need a hidden text to be poetic. The use of the term “Ballade” is but one example of the tendency of the Romantics to give their works titles borrowed from literature or painting. The piano pieces by **Felix Mendelssohn** (1809–47) entitled *Songs Without Words* are another example. Not all of these 50 pieces could be sung, and none of them seem to tell stories, but there are many in which you can distinctly hear the human voice through the piano—or two human voices, as in the case of the piece called “Duetto.” This is first half, played by the great Russian pianist **Emil Gilels**.

22. Mendelssohn: “Duetto” from *Lieder ohne Worte*.

## D. Different Dialogues [10:45]

### 23. Section title D (skylark against clouds)

Let's turn now to poetry itself. Just as music does not need words to be poetic, so poetry does not need to be sung to be musical. However, the reader needs to be attuned to the inherent music. If we are talking about conversations with the text, the reader too is engaging in a conversation with the poet, simply through the choices he or she makes.

### 24. Shelley: *To a Skylark*, first four stanzas

I want to try a little experiment. Sticking with our bird theme, here are the first four stanzas of *To a Skylark* by **Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792–1822); it takes about a minute to speak. I am going to give you two different readings, in audio only. Other than the fact that one is a man and the other a woman, how do they differ in the tone they bring to it, the rhythm, and the music they find in it? I'll follow this immediately by a third reader, who in addition to making his own choices adds some images and music, *The Lark Ascending* (1920) by **Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872–1958). Take notes, and let's compare!

25. Shelley: *To a Skylark*, opening (Tony Britton).

26. Shelley: *To a Skylark*, opening (Glenn Close).

27. Shelley: *To a Skylark*, opening (Paul Pavan Keetley).

28. Shelley: *To a Skylark*, first four stanzas (repeat of text slide)

What did you think, first between the two straight readings, and then in terms of what the third one added? My own view about the third example is that while the man's choice of music is totally appropriate and his visual images are not bad, they are overkill; some kinds of conversations between the arts are not dialogues so much as each shouting the other out. That said, my last clip may surprise you, as it is an actual song setting with sung words. But if you listen carefully, you will see that the composer, **Julie Cooper** (contemp.), has not used the Shelley text literally, but made a kind of collage from it, for example with the title, "To a Skylark," repeated again and again as a refrain. So this is also a kind of conversation. Cooper wrote it as a gift for this mother-son pair, **Grace and Joshua Davidson**.

29. Julie Cooper: *To a Skylark*

30. Class title 2 (Shelley's Skylark)

## E. Writing About the Classics

### 31. Section title E (Beethoven and Brahms)

Another kind of dialogue is where the music and the poetry exists entirely separately, with one inspiring the other. So this section will give you a short poem about **Brahms** and a whole book of short poems inspired by the **Beethoven** *Kreutzer Sonata*. Let's start by listening to a snatch of the Beethoven.

### 32. Beethoven: *Kreutzer Sonata*, opening

### 33. Rita Dove and *Sonata Mulattica*

The *Kreutzer* is by far the most difficult of all the Beethoven sonatas; my wife and I have a go at all the others, but we won't touch this one! The violinist here, **Randall Goosby**, clearly had no problem. Among the dozen or so performers on YouTube, he was the only one I could find who was black. And this is important, for the original inspiration for the sonata was the mulatto violin prodigy **George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower**, whom he called his *gran pazzo* or crazy wild man. But they fell out over a girl and Beethoven angrily rededicated it to another violinist who in the end never ever played it. So, instead of the "Bridgetower Sonata," we have the *Kreutzer*. This fact fascinated the Pulitzer Prize-winner and former Poet Laureate **Rita Dove** (b.1952), who wrote a sequence of almost 100 poems speculating on Bridgetower's life, that became the book shown here, *Sonata Mulattica*. I'll let her explain it, in the trailer of a movie made about the book.

### 34. Rita Dove: *Sonata Mulattica* movie trailer, excerpt.

### 35. Rita Dove: "Polgreen Sight-Reading" from *Sonata Mulattica*.

### 36. Brahms title for the *Clarinet Quintet*.

Not every poet is so ambitious, but plenty have written individual poems about music. The collection I recommended earlier, *The Music Lover's Poetry Anthology*, has several by the Canadian philosopher and poet **Jan Zwicky** (b.1955). She has one about listening to the *Clarinet Quintet* by **Johannes Brahms** (1833–97) —but I'll wait before showing it. First, let's hear how the music begins. The clarinetist is **Charles Neidich** with the **Parker Quartet**. Take notes as you listen, and let's discuss your impressions.

### 37. Brahms: *Clarinet Quintet*, exposition

### 38. — still from the above

### 39. Jan Zwicky: "Brahms' Clarinet Quintet in B Minor, Op. 115."

What did you hear? Here is Jan Zwicky's response. Clearly, it is more than a description of the music—but it is inspired by the music. It is a poem about autumn, memories, regret. Hearing even the first few pages of the piece itself would surely impress you immediately with its color, "brown, its reedy clarities." And the work is made even more poignant when you know that Brahms had already retired from composing when he met the clarinetist **Richard Mühlfeld** in 1891 and heard him play. In a remarkably fruitful Indian Summer, he composed this Quintet, a Trio, and two Sonatas, all for Mühlfeld, four of his richest and most reflective works.