

Class 6: Words for Music

A. Gilbert & Sullivan

1. Title Slide (*Hamilton*)

Two weeks ago, we looked at composers writing music for texts that already existed. Today, we shall consider the opposite: lyricists writing words specifically for a composer to set, sometimes for already-existing music. It is another huge subject, and once more I can only grab at pieces of it.

2. Title slide with Fantasy and Life labels

Two pieces in particular. In the second hour, I shall look at the relation between the American song and history, current affairs, or **real life**. In the first, I am going to look at songs as fantasy. Before moving to America, though, I want to look at **Gilbert and Sullivan**, two writers in Victorian Britain whose works were all set in the world of fantasy, but who used it to make sharp points about the society of their time.

3. Section title A: Alan Corduner and Jim Broadbent in *Topsy Turvy* (Mike Leigh, 1999)

The collaboration between **William Schwenck Gilbert** (1836–1911) and **Arthur Seymour Sullivan** (1842–1900) is one of the great pairings in the history of the musical stage, producing between 1871 and 1896 the long series of operettas mounted at the **Savoy Theatre**, London, by the impresario **Richard D'Oyly Carte**, including *HMS Pinafore*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Mikado*, and *The Gondoliers*. But they didn't much like each other, as this still from the 1999 movie *Topsy Turvy* might suggest. However, I don't want to go into the history, so much as to use a couple of numbers from *The Mikado* (1885), set in a totally imaginary Japan, to explore some of the ways in which words and music can combine. First, the song "I've got a little list," sung by the Lord High Executioner **Ko Ko**, listing all those types in Victorian society that he would like to see dead. Then immediately after, "The sun whose rays are all ablaze" sung by the heroine **Yum Yum** on her wedding day. After we have heard both, I want to ask you how much each song is about the words, and how much about the music. Both performances are traditional ones in productions by the **D'Oyly Carte Company**, vintage 1960s, faithfully preserving Gilbert's original staging.

4. Gilbert and Sullivan: *The Mikado*, "As someday it may happen" (John Reed)

5. Gilbert and Sullivan: *The Mikado*, "The sun whose rays" (Valerie Masterson)

6. — stills from both the above

So which was the dominant medium in each case, and why? Ko Ko's song has a catchy tune, but its purpose is surely to carry the words; it is Gilbert's cleverness that is the main point. Yum Yum's song, on the other hand, has music that is sheer beauty, especially in the refrain. For lack of better terms, let's call them **word-song** and **music-song** respectively.

7. Yum Yum's dialogue and opening of "The sun whose rays"

So Yum Yum's is a music song, an example of what would now be called a **ballad**. Its point is in its sentiment, and that sentiment is largely conveyed in the music. But look at the dialogue that Gilbert wrote to introduce it. Gilbert is clearly being satirical here; the line "in my artless Japanese way" is the giveaway. Despite the disclaimer, Yum Yum's song is *entirely* about vanity. Sullivan *could* have set it for comedy, but he doesn't. Somewhere along the line, he does a switch, and makes it entirely romantic. If you were to listen to the song sung in some language that you didn't understand, you would not get the satire at all. Here it is with the dialogue in **Jonathan Miller's** 1983 production for the English National Opera, sung by **Lesley Garrett**. You will notice that he jettisons the Japanese setting completely, noting that it is simply Gilbert's device to comment on *English* society. So we are in a seaside hotel, sometime in the twenties.

8. Gilbert and Sullivan: *The Mikado*, "The sun whose rays" (Lesley Garrett)

9. Richard Stuart as Ko Ko

Nevertheless, Sullivan *did* write non-satirical music for this, making it a perfect example of the **romantic ballad**; I'll spend most of the rest of the hour on such things. The other is not emotional but **clever**. gave it a tune that rattles along to a steady beat; any more would cover the words, and in this, the words are the point. But with Gilbert's words, you either have to put notes in the program explaining the Victorian references, or update them with modern ones. The ENO production chose updating, which has to be rewritten with each revival. The lines sung by **Richard Stuart** in 2015 are already out of date, though you will get at least one of them! I'll return to the topic of political commentary in the second hour.

10. Gilbert and Sullivan: *The Mikado*, "I've got a little list" (Richard Stuart)

11. George Rose as Major General Stanley

One thing I regret about that production is that the music has to be taken so slowly to make sure all the updated lines get across. Part of the fun of the **patter song**, to give it its more usual name, which goes back to Mozart at least, is the speed with which the singer rattles off all those marvelous words. Here is probably the most famous Gilbert and Sullivan example of the lot, the **Major General's song** in the 1983 film of **Joseph Papp's** production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. The satire that, well into the 20th century, a humanistic education at Oxford or Cambridge was considered appropriate for high positions in the army or just about any profession; gentlemen did not concern themselves with all that technical stuff. You will note that after one fairly quick verse, **George Rose** then goes to a quite slow one—but boy does he make up for it later!

12. Gilbert and Sullivan: *The Pirates of Penzance*, Major General Stanley (George Rose)

B. Longing & Regret

13. Section title B (Tin Pan Alley covers)

I'd like to give you a few later examples of the **sentimental ballad** type of song, and discuss them in the context of the main theme of this course: the relationship between words and music. I am going to perform, if you like, quite gentle autopsies on three American standards. The song at the top right here, "After the Ball is Over," was the first mega-hit in popular music. Written in 1891 by **Charles K. Harris** (1867–1930)—both words and music—it sold over two million copies of sheet music in the succeeding year, which was how success was measured. When **Jerome Kern** (1885–1945) and **Oscar Hammerstein II** (1895–60) were writing the musical *Show Boat* in 1927, and wanted to insert a stage act that would bring back the flavor of the late 19th century, they borrowed Harris's song. Here is **Rebecca Baxter** singing it in the 1989 production aired on PBS.

14. Harris: "After the ball is over," as quoted in *Show Boat*

15. — still from the above

What do you think of the text? It is sentimental, of course, but I think it is effective. First because it is based on a *paradox*—that even in the context of high romance, hearts may be broken in secret. And second, because of the *sequence of connected images* (ball over, break of morn, dancers leaving, stars gone) which reinforce this paradox in a natural way, without seeming forced. But this is only the chorus; it comes after three verses of set-up, each of which is significantly longer than the chorus itself. Here is the opening half-verse sung by the writer himself, **Charles K. Harris**, towards the end of his life.

16. Harris: "After the ball is over," sung by himself

17. Text of all three verses.

He only sang half a verse, so **I'll read the text**. How does it strike you? Not to put too fine a point on it, I think it sucks! There is none of the natural flow of images you get in the chorus. It is a very elaborate and fictional set up to particularize perceptive and true observation that "many a heart is broken, after the ball." And it contains some simply dreadful lines, such as "List to the story, I'll tell it all." I think that Harris hit upon the chorus first—a few phrases of words or music, or maybe both, I don't know—but then had come come up a way to give it a context, as convention demanded at the time (and would continue to demand until the mid-20th century at least). The situation is inherently implausible, and the words to describe it are obviously manufactured.

18. "Somewhere over the rainbow," title

My next gentle deconstruction is of "Somewhere over the rainbow," the opening song of the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*; it is the first we see of **Judy Garland**, then only 16. Let's watch the clip. The song does not have the long introduction that "After the Ball" had; being in a movie, it grows straight out of the dialogue, perfectly naturally. So it begins with the title phrase, which in a standalone song would be the chorus. It does, however, have a **bridge passage** ("Someday I'll wish upon a star") that makes the return of the big theme even more heartwarming.

19. Harburg and Arlen: "Somewhere over the rainbow," in *The Wizard of Oz*

20. Harburg and Arlen

The music is by **Harold Arlen** (1905–86) and the words by **Yip Harburg** (1896–1981). Now in the kind of collaborations I have done professionally myself, the words always come first: the lyricist provides the script and the composer either sets it as is, or gets the writer to tinker with it until he can set it. But this is not always, or even usually, the case with popular music. In this case, according to Wikipedia, Harburg had the initial inspiration: "a ballad for a little girl who was in trouble and wanted to get away from Kansas. A dry, arid, colorless place. She had never seen anything colorful in her life except the rainbow." Arlen decided the idea needed "a melody with a long broad line". It was the last thing he composed for the show, but apparently it came to him driving in downtown Los Angeles with his wife; telling her to pull over, he grabbed a scrap of manuscript and jotted it down. Back home a few hours later, the song did emerge as "a melody with a long broad line". Here is **Yo-Yo Ma** with pianist **Kathryn Stott**.

21. Arlen: "Somewhere over the rainbow," Yo-Yo Ma

22. Yip Harburg: words for the song

So Yip Harburg went home with that long melody and came up with the words. Just looking at them as text, I don't think much more highly of it than Charles Harris's verses for *After the Ball*; "If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow, why, oh why can't I?" is really pretty cheesy, and "troubles melt like lemon drops" is not much better. BUT, if you consider these as words to articulate already-existing music, they take on a different aspect. For one thing, note that there is almost no punctuation; the words do not impose a syntax on the music, but follow the music's syntax. For another, note that the questionable images such as the bluebirds come in quite late; they are not the substance of the idea, merely ornaments to it. And finally, listen for how effectively these words support Arlen's idea of the long melodic line. Here is Garland again, with my annotations on the text.

23. Harburg and Arlen: "Somewhere over the rainbow," audio with text

24. *Moon River* title

I'll leave my last example mainly to you. It is another rainbow's end song, also the opening song in a movie, which this time is not basically a musical. Near the beginning of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), the writer character (a stand-in for the author **Truman Capote**, played by **George Peppard**) hears his neighbor **Holly Golightly** (Audrey Hepburn) out on the fire escape, singing a song, *Moon River*. Let's listen. Tell me how you think it works, how it compares to "Over the Rainbow," and what the text contributes to the effect of the song.

25. Mercer and Mancini: "Moon River" scene from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*

26. — text of the above (repeat)

So using the same methods, what do you think? This has always stuck with me as the perfect ballad of yearning. It's a wonderful tune, for one thing; the composer is **Henry Mancini** (1924–94). I read that the lyricist, **Johnny Mercer** (1909–76), generally liked to have the music before writing the words, just like Yip Harburg did; do you think that was the case here? Personally, I doubt it; the music is not a standalone melody, but seems to follow the rhythm of the words; it is difficult to believe this was done

by reverse engineering. I like it that they do not attempt to make any obvious logical syntax—just a series of images, slightly off-center, but adding up very strongly to a mood. It is not just the words, but the spaces between the words that count. They are based, apparently, on memories of his childhood growing up in Savannah. The setting in the movie is also perfect, because it begins so simply, with just the guitar accompaniment; the studio orchestra enters only halfway through. There are many covers of this song out there, most notably by **Andy Williams**, but the original is unique. Apparently, the producers wanted to cut the song as dead weight, but Hepburn said “Over my dead body,” though in more colorful language!

C. Send In the Clowns

27. Section title C (Judi Dench)

Since we seem to have gotten into the mood for sad ballads, I’ll give you just one more: “Send in the Clowns” from *A Little Night Music* (1973) by **Stephen Sondheim** (1930–2021). This time, I won’t attempt to deconstruct it, but will play portions of a television interview that Sondheim himself gave, talking about the composition of this number, and his working methods in general. I’ll follow it with a performance of the song itself, not in a stage production, but by **Dame Judi Dench** in a BBC Promenade Concert in London. Yes, Judi Dench, not some singer, for the role of **Desirée**, a famous but now aging actress, calls for another great actress to play her. The song begins almost as speech, and only gradually commits to the music; *it is another variant on the relationship of the two media*, and one that became something of a specialty of Sondheim’s. And it is another song that depends on the spaces between the words as much as the words themselves. CONTEXT: we are now approaching the end of the show, and the various amatory infidelities and other antics are winding to a close; Desirée is forced to confront her own mortality. The phrase “send in the clowns” is a theatrical one, referring to what goes on after the serious business of drama has come to its close.

28. Sondheim on “Send in the Clowns”

29. Sondheim: *A Little Night Music*, “Send in the Clowns” (Judi Dench)

30. Class title 2 (The American Songbook)

D. History in Song

31. Section title D (WWI recruiting poster)

I had intended to do a whole section on American “**clever songs**,” text-intensive songs like Cole Porter’s “You’re the Top” that I played in the first class. There is a huge range to choose from—Porter, Irving Berlin, the Gershwins and many others—but that itself became a problem; any selection I made would be entirely arbitrary. [I do have one such song coming up, but it is in a different context.] So I decided instead to devote the last hour to a simple proposition: that the words in text-intensive songs can be used for serious purposes as well as frivolous ones, reflecting what is going on in the real world. So a brief glimpse of American 20th-century history through song.

32. George M. Cohan, words of “Over There”

In writing the World War One recruitment song “Over There” in 1917, **George M. Cohan** (1878–1942) needed to counteract the American resistance to involvement in a European war. Not only did his song fill the bill in WW1, it was also recalled to service in WW2, as there were no new songs with the power to match it. The words aren’t particular clever—basic patriotic stuff, with appeals to manhood, love, and family. But it has one brilliant line, “*And we won’t come back till it’s over, over there,*” and a three-note bugle-call phrase to match it, and that was enough. Here, from the 1942 film *Yankee Doodle Dandy* starring **James Cagney**, is a reconstruction of how Cohan thought that phrase up.

33. Cohan: “Over There,” from *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942)

34. “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” title side

The War ushered in the Roaring Twenties, but they didn’t last, and we got the Stock Market Crash and Great Depression. Surely no song captures the pain of that era so well as “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” written by **Yip Harburg** and **Jay Gorney** (1896–1990) for a revue in 1932. Yes, the same Yip Harburg who would go on to write “Someday over the Rainbow”! It was written for a Broadway revue called *Americana*, but it shot to fame only after it was picked up by the likes of Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallee, and Al Jolson, who sung it on the airwaves. Apparently business leaders tried to ban it as “a dangerous attack on the American economic system,” but the song was already too popular.

35. “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” text

Most songs of the period were resolutely upbeat, as we shall hear in a moment, but this one is slow, in a minor key, and resolutely realistic. Here is the text; can you see why it should have succeeded? I think it is because it gives the speaker a dignity—he is someone who has done something for his country to be proud of—and because it is so devoid of cliché and utterly honest. It is hard to imagine the same author writing “Where happy little bluebirds sing” only a decade later. I won’t play it in a recording from the period, but in a modern cover by an Australian singer called **Bruce Hearn** that evokes the period well, but then goes on to show that it is still relevant, even today. Brace yourselves—

36. Harburg and Gorney: “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” (Bruce Hearn)

37. “Happy Days are Here Again” title side

When I was preparing this class, I assumed that my next song, “Happy Days are Here Again,” came chronologically after “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” After all, we associate it with **FDR**, the **New Deal**, and the beginning of the end of the Depression. But I was wrong. The song was written in 1929, as part of a movie musical, *Chasing Rainbows*; the words are by **Jack Yellen** (1892–1991) and the music by **Milton Ager** (1893–1979). It’s context, therefore, is fantasy. It was only an afterthought that FDR’s advisers chose to play it at his 1932 convention, thus bringing it into real life. Once again, I will play it in a cover version, because I am so taken with this particular video. It looks like archival footage of VE Day, or shortly before it, with the US Army liberating some small town in Europe. But in fact, after the first clips, it is all a reconstruction by a Belgian group called **The Army Stars**, and the whole thing is staged. Brilliantly so, it seems to me.

38. Ager & Yellen: “Happy Days are Here Again!” (Army Stars)

39. Streisand and Coward

I want to add two footnotes to “Happy Days.” The young **Barbra Streisand** (b.1942) sang it on her first record in 1962. She includes the introductory verse, which just slips into the familiar chorus. But the effect is entirely different: can you hear what she is doing?

40. Ager & Yellen: “Happy Days are Here Again!” (opening, Streisand)

41. Streisand and Coward (repeat)

Did you hear the difference? Although she will pick it up later, she begins quietly and down-tempo like a **ballad**. It now has a wistfulness, like “Over the Rainbow.” My second footnote comes from something my cousin in Britain wrote to me the other day. She says that the woes in Britain, with Brexit, strikes, and an apparent revolving door of incompetents at No. 10 Downing Street is such that a 1952 song by **Noel Coward** (1899–1973) is becoming relevant all over again. Although doing it in a British context, Coward is taking all those “Keep smiling and carry on” clichés and turning them on their head, singing of Depression in the upbeat tones of “Happy Days.” And with his brilliant use of British place names, it fits as perfectly into the “clever song” genre as Cole Porter was doing around the same time!

42. Coward: “There are bad times just around the corner”

E. The (almost) Spoken Word

43. Section title E (Ice-T)

This is the former rapper, now television actor, **Ice-T** (Lauren Morrow, b.1958). While I admit that I know next to nothing about it, I feel that my theme demands that I at least touch on **rap**, because it is an art form that clearly begins with verse—verse that feeds in sometimes to music, and always to rhythm. It is a contemporary urban culture, predominantly a Black culture, and as such absolutely qualifies in my

hour of “Songs of Life.” Yet as it so often seems to be characterized by violence and profanity, I have generally stayed clear of it, and I imagine I am not alone. However, the success of the musical *Hamilton* has introduced a more approachable form of rap. I ended my first class with a scene from *Hamilton*, and I’m going to end this last one with another. But first, I want to show you—very cautiously—two other clips as a warm up.

44. Poetry Slam graphic

I call the section **The (almost) Spoken Word** because I think that rap begins as performative verse and only partially becomes a musical genre. So my first example is a verse monologue by a young Black poet called **Rudy Francisco** (b.1982), the author of 6 published collections of poetry. Here he is performing in a **Poetry Slam**, which is a competition for spoken word. You will hear that begins like a regular monologue, but keeps plunging into longer riffs of rhythmical speech, which is rap. I find him both personable and compelling.

45. Rudy Francisco: *Adrenalin Rush*

46. Ice-T graphic

The next is a short segment of Ice-T himself, in a relatively early video called “I am Your Pusher.” The language is that of drug-dealing, but I think that what he is actually dealing are pirate tapes of banned rap performances. Two things. There now is a musical beat underlying all of this, but it is not actually composed, so much as **sampled** from existing records, layered, looped, and assembled by various means. Second, you will see that a lot of this is a verbal duel with another speaker, a virtuoso exchange of insults; this too is part of the rap tradition, which often takes the form of a duel.

47. Ice-T: “I’m your Pusher”

48. Miranda graphic

Finally, the number “I’m not throwing away my shot” from *Hamilton* (2015), which follows immediately after the sequence I played in the first class. You will notice that the dialogue at the beginning takes place entirely in rhythmic rapped speech, with each character having his own distinctive style. This morphs seamlessly into actual music with a tune, not so different from any other musical but more integrated. The role of Hamilton himself is taken by the author, lyricist, and composer **Lin-Manuel Miranda** (b.1980). Apart from all those talents, his great insight is to realize that the kind of aggressive energy typical of a contemporary ghetto genre can be transferred to a historical drama about the founding fathers of this country.

49. Miranda: *Hamilton*, “My Shot”

50. Class title 3 (Broadway)