

Sunset Harvest



6. Surprised by Joy

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AFTER A LIFETIME of melodrama and tragedy, **Giuseppe Verdi** turned to comedy in his last opera, *Falstaff*, which he premiered at age 80. Though never a stranger to joy in his earlier work, **Henri Matisse**, confined to a wheelchair, rediscovered his youthful energy in colorful paper cutouts. **Marc Chagall** found his salvation in music. And stern abstractionist (but jazz-lover) **Piet Mondrian** seemed to be entering new ground in his last works, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* and *Victory Boogie-Woogie*. Poets and film-makers, for some reason, seldom experience a wild stylistic shift in their last years, but those such as **Seamus Heaney**, **Mary Oliver**, **Federico Fellini**, and **Robert Altman**, whose work had been characterized by joy and grace throughout, just became that much more graceful, more joyful. *rb.*

A. Matisse, Mondrian, and Music

Following an operation for abdominal cancer in 1941, **Henri Matisse** was confined to a wheelchair, but this did not stop him from making brilliant new creations by arranging shapes cut out of paper pre-painted by his assistants, turning the results into prints, architectural decorations, and artworks intended to hang on their own.

Matisse: *Plum Blossoms* (1948, NY MoMA)

Matisse: *White Alga on an Orange and Red Background* (1947)

Matisse: *Two Dancers* (1937–38)

Matisse: *The Fall of Icarus* (1946)

♫ **Matisse:** *Jazz* (1946), to **Milhaud's** *La création du monde* (1923)

Matisse: *The Sheaf* (1953)

Matisse: *The Swimming Pool* and *Blue Nude* (both 1952)

Matisse: *Memory of Oceania* (1953, NY MoMA)

When **Piet Mondrian** fled Paris for London and then New York at the start of WW2, he took with him a number of abstracts he still considered unfinished. But in the new land, these evolved into freer forms, with increased color and syncopated rhythms influenced by jazz.

- ♪ **Mondrian:** *Place de la Concorde*, conjectural original, 1938
- ♪ **Mondrian:** *Place de la Concorde* (1943, Dallas)
- ♪ **Mondrian:** *New York City I* (1942, Paris MNAM)
- ♪ **Mondrian:** *Victory Boogie-Woogie* (1944, unfinished, The Hague)
- ♪ **Mondrian:** *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1943, NY MoMA)
- ♪ **Mondrian:** *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, with Basie's *Rushing*

Marc Chagall returned to France after the war, and continued with many of the same subjects, though with an increased interest in Jewish themes. However, the invitation to repaint the ceiling of the Paris Opera in 1963, and a similar commission from the new Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center, unleashed a spurt of lavish creativity inspired by music.

- ♪ **Chagall:** Ceiling of the *Palais Garnier* (Opéra), 1964
- ♪ **Chagall:** *The Triumph of Music* (1966, Metropolitan Opera)
- ♪ **Chagall** designs for the Metropolitan Opera

B. Preludes and Fugues

Six poems by four poets, spanning a trajectory from a fervent embrace of natural joy to greeting the end of life with optimism and grace.

- ♪ **Cummings:** "I thank you God," read by the author
- ♪ **Oliver:** *Don't Hesitate* (reader unknown)
- ♪ **Oliver:** *When Death Comes*, read by Adam Barr
- ♪ **Heaney:** *Postscript*, read by the author
- ♪ **Heaney:** *A Kite for Aibhin*, read by the author
- ♪ **Dunmore:** "My life's stem was cut."

C. Final Cuts

We sample scenes from the final films of two great film directors. *The Voice of the Moon* (1990) by **Federico Fellini** is a lunatic fantasy about a man recently released from a mental hospital, and a civic official fired

because of his rising paranoia. *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006) by **Robert Altman** is equally free in structure, but sweeter and more nostalgic, as it celebrates the final performance of the famous radio show presented live in Saint Paul MN.

- ♪ **Fellini:** *The Voice of the Moon*, dance sequence
- ♪ **Altman:** *A Prairie Home Companion*, excerpts

D. All the World's a Stage

Verdi was 80 in 1893, when his final opera *Falstaff* premiered. His first comedy since his first operatic attempt, it marked a radical change from the melodramatic tragedies that had made his reputation. And, unusually for a late work, it is not the product of more relaxed formal constraints, but rather feats of intricate craftsmanship that make the work as controlled in structure as it is free in spirit.

- ♪ **Verdi:** *Falstaff*, Act I, scene 2 complete
Royal Opera, 1982. Carlo Maria Giulini, d. Ronald Eyre. Katia Ricciarelli (Alice), Barbara Hendricks (Nannetta), Brenda Boozer (Meg), Lucia Valentini-Terrano (Quickly), Dalmacio Gonzalez (Fenton), John Dobson (Caius), Francis Egerton (Bardolph), William Wildermann (Pistol).
- ♪ **Verdi:** *Falstaff*, Act III, scene 2, from the entrance of Falstaff
Cast as above, with Renato Bruson (Falstaff)

Full Names of Artists, Composers, and Writers

Robert **Altman** (director, 1925–2006), Arrigo **Boïto** (librettist, 1842–1918), Marc **Chagall** (painter, 1887–1985), E. E. **Cummings** (poet, 1894–1962), Helen **Dunmore** (poet, 1952–2017), Federico **Fellini** (director, 1920–93), Seamus **Heaney** (poet, 1939–2013), Henri **Matisse** (painter, 1869–1954), Darius **Milhaud** (composer, 1892–1974), Piet **Mondrian** (painter, 1872–1944), Mary **Oliver** (poet, 1935–2019), Giuseppe **Verdi** (composer, 1813–1901)