

Class 6 : Surprised by Joy

A. Matisse, Mondrian, and Music

1. Section title A (Matisse/Verdi)

I originally proposed this class to take into account two remarkable artists who moved into a surprising new style in their last years, characterized by light, color, and joy. These are **Henri Matisse**, who in his last decade put down his brush and took up a pair of scissors, and **Giuseppe Verdi**, who left behind a lifetime of composing tragic melodramas to turn at the age of eighty to comedy. I will add a couple of other painters, and handful of poets, and one or two film directors; their transformations have been less dramatic, but I can still promise plenty of radiance to end what has been a rather somber course.

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

3. — the above, with *White Alga on an Orange and Red Background* (1947)

This, the *Plum Blossoms* of 1948, is pretty much the last painting that **Henri Matisse** (1869–1954) executed with a brush. Already by this time he had taken to cutting out sheets of paper that had been painted a uniform color by assistants to his direction, and arranging the pieces; this one is called *White Alga on an Orange and Red Background*—clearly the same artist at work, but in a different key.

4. Matisse: *Two Dancers* (1937–38)

5. — the above, with *The Fall of Icarus* (1946)

This was not simply an artistic decision. Matisse underwent an operation in 1941 to remove an abdominal cancer, which left him more or less confined to a wheelchair. But he referred to his last 14 years as “a second life”—artistically, it proved to be a release rather than a constriction. You can see him with scissors in hand here, and how the cutout shapes were originally held in place with thumbtacks. Actually, this one dates from a decade earlier, when Matisse was designing for the *Ballets Russes*; it is clear that, at that stage at least, he made a distinction between applied art (design) and fine art (painting). Of course the thumb tacks did not remain; somebody else would turn the designs into painted scenery, or make them into lithographic plates; and when the pictures were to remain unique as fine art, the assistants would glue them down. The first extensive set Matisse made by this new technique was a portfolio of prints issued in 1946 called *Jazz*. Reportedly, he was disappointed by the final result, which flattened everything out into a single plane, but that did not stop me making a little montage of them, to some jazz-influenced French music from the twenties, *The Creation of the World* by **Darius Milhaud** (1892–1974).

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

7. Matisse: *The Sheaf* (1953)

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

Much of Matisse's cut-out work remained in the realm of design. This wonderful spray of colored fronds, called *The Sheaf*, was made in 1953 for the guidance of ceramicists who would make it into tiles to cover the walls of a rich patron's house. And he made this frieze, which he called *The Swimming Pool*, to decorate all four walls of his own dining room; it is displayed this way at MoMA.

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

But some of his cut-paper works, such as this *Memory of Oceania* from 1953, remained as art to hang on a wall, and they are every bit as considered as his finest earlier work—more so, even. I am told that if you look at this carefully, you can see how he kept moving the pieces a little bit one way and then the other, until he had found just the right balance. It is based on memories of a trip he took to Tahiti in the 1930s, and in part on a photograph he took from the window of his schooner.

10. A Mondrian painting of the 1930's

Could there be a greater contrast among contemporaries than that between Matisse and **Piet Mondrian** (1872–1944)? How could this ascetic, buttoned-up individual experience any late-life transformation, let alone make room for Joy? But he did. In 1938, he left Paris where he had been working, and moved first to London and then in 1940 to New York. And he brought with him a number of paintings that others might have sold as finished, but he kept tinkering with obsessively, to get the balance just right.

11. Mondrian: *Place de la Concorde*, conjectural original, 1938

12. Mondrian: *Place de la Concorde* (1943, Dallas)

Here, on the right, is my guess at what one of these paintings might have looked like, with a finished work of the time on the left for comparison. As you see, both consist of a grid of horizontal and vertical black lines, with a couple of rectangles of primary color added. But when he picked it up again in New York, what did he do to the finished version? He added little bars of color that, for the first time ever, were not bounded by black lines. "It gave it more boogie-woogie," he said—for however improbably, Mondrian loved Jazz. The piece, which is now in Dallas, is called *Place de la Concorde*, and the boogie-woogie gives it some sense of the symphony of car horns circling its roundabout.

13. Mondrian: *New York City I* (1942, Paris MNAM), with detail of *New York City II*

Mondrian made one other discovery in New York, that oddly enough brings him quite close to Matisse. He found he could buy paper tape in primary colors, and could pin it to the canvas to test out arrangements, much as Matisse was doing at more or less the same time. Here is one piece that he developed in this way, *New York City I*, which has now found its way back to Paris. The black boundaries have gone, as you can see; the little colored bars have expanded into colored lines that cross the canvas from one side to another. It is really quite a transformation. Once he had everything right, of course, Mondrian would replace the tape with paint, but I also show a detail of a similar unfinished work showing the paper tape still in place.

14. Mondrian: *Victory Boogie-Woogie* (1944, unfinished, The Hague)

And here is his last-ever work, left unfinished at his death. By this time, the boogie-woogie had taken over entirely. There are still the horizontal and vertical lines, but they are on a diamond-shaped canvas, and are no longer of a single color. Instead, they are broken up into little squares, at this stage made up partly of paint and partly of little tacked-on paper squares that presumably would eventually also be replaced by paint. He called it *Victory Boogie-Woogie*.

15. Mondrian: *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1943, NY MoMA)

16. Mondrian: *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, animation to Count Basie's *Rushing*

But we needn't end on an unfinished work. Here is his *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* from the year before. I will follow it by a video made by pianist/videographer John Chmaj, animating it to *Rushing* by **Count Basie**. It manages to be true both to Basie and Broadway, and I think to Mondrian's inspiration. And what is it if not JOY?

17. Marc Chagall: *Ceiling of the Palais Garnier (Opéra)*, 1964

18. — the same with detail

19. — more details

Marc Chagall (1887–1985) was one of the longest-lived painters of all time, but he had begun to repeat himself in his last years—except for two things. It is probably simplistic to say this, but I would say that his late career was illuminated, even redeemed, by two things: his rediscovery of his Jewish identity, and his love of music. I have addressed the Jewish aspect in another course; right now, let me stick with the music. In 1963, he was commissioned by **André Malraux** to paint a new ceiling for the *Palais Garnier*, the venerable home of the Paris Opera. It was a controversial project—the French are very conservative towards their national monuments—but Chagall entered into it with all he had to give, filling the dome with references to classic operas and ballets, Paris landmarks, and reminiscences of his own works. Some years ago, the Paris orchestra mounted a multi-media exposition of the music he must have been listening to when painting each portion of the ceiling.

20. Chagall: *The Triumph of Music* (1966, Metropolitan Opera)

Probably on the strength of this (and also because he was well-known in New York, having lived there all through the forties and fifties), Chagall was commissioned to paint the two huge decorative panels for the lobby of the new **Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center**: *The Origins of Music* and *The Triumph of Music*. He was also invited to design scenery and costumes for the 1966 production of Mozart's *Magic Flute*. I don't know why they haven't remained in the repertoire for as long as some of the Zeffirelli productions; they are truly magnificent. Still, it gives me the opportunity to put them together with part of the *Magic Flute* overture in a little montage of my own.

21. Chagall designs for the Metropolitan Opera

B. Preludes and Fugues

22. Section title B (Four poets: Cummings, Oliver, Heaney, Dunmore)

I am calling this section “Preludes and Fugues” because the six poems I include run from songs of joy, written when the Grim Reaper is merely a figure on the distant horizon, to the final or almost-final poems of each writer, greeting him as a friend. And though the word “Fugue” might connote escape, I think of it more as a wild flight of fancy, a dance of joy. My first Prelude is “I thank you God for most this amazing day” by **E. E. Cummings** (1894–1962), written in 1950, late in his life, though not at the very end of it. With Mozart and all this jazz in my ears, I hear it as crisp, exuberant, syncopated. I was therefore quite surprised to hear Cummings recite the poem himself.

23. E. E. Cummings: “I thank you God for most this amazing day”

24. — the same, read by the author

There are a lot of videos of **Mary Oliver** (1935–2019) reading her poems—I will put some links on the website—but unfortunately none of the two that best fit my theme (or at least none that haven’t been overlaid with obnoxious music). The first, *Don’t Hesitate*, is a Prelude from the middle of her life, another *Hymn to Joy*. The second, *When Death Comes*, is what I call a Fugue. It was written following the death of her partner in 2005, but there is nothing elegiac about it; she means to go out with the same amazement that characterized all her life. Alas, I could only get a male reader for this, **Adam Barr**, but he’s good; with the first reader, I know nothing beyond her first name: Rebecca.

25. Mary Oliver: *Don’t Hesitate*

26. Mary Oliver: *When Death Comes*, read by Adam Barr

I have a similar Prelude and Fugue pair for **Seamus Heaney** (1939–2013), this time both read by the poet. The Prelude is one I have played in another class before, a short poem called *Postscript*, late indeed but not last. The Fugue is printed last in his last collection. Called *A Kite for Aibhin*, it is actually a reworking of an Italian original, but it is so absolutely a fugue in its intricacy, its playful sweep, and its literal meaning of taking flight. He wrote it for his grand-daughter.

27. Seamus Heaney: *Postscript*

28. Seamus Heaney: *A Kite for Aibhin*

Finally, a poem from the last collection of a writer you may not know, the English novelist and poet **Helen Dunmore** (1952–2017). The poems in this book, *Inside the Wave*, were written after she had been diagnosed with cancer. Perhaps it is stretching it to say Joy, but she is certainly approaching the end with beauty and grace.

29. Helen Dunmore: “My life’s stem was cut.”

C. Final Cuts

30. Section title C (Fellini and Altman)

I took it into my head to look through the final movie made by about two dozen great directors, to see if any of those ended in a sudden access of Joy. I have to say that for the most part, these “Final Cuts” continued the manner that had already made each director famous. But I did find two that more or less fit my premise. Yes, **Federico Fellini** (1920–93) had always been known for his scenes of cinematic mania and his touches of sweetness, but I think you’ll agree that his last film, *The Voice of the Moon* (1990) is that much more manic and every bit as bitter-sweet. **Robert Altman** (1925–2006) was in a wheelchair and on oxygen when he made his last film, *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006), and it could be said to continue the loose style of filmmaking by random association, not to mention its portrayal of music, that he showed so brilliantly in *Nashville* (1975), but this last venture seems more relaxed, more spontaneous, more *LateStyle*, if you will.

31. Poster for *The Voice of the Moon*

I had to omit my main Fellini clip last week, so let’s try again now. The story, such as it is, centers around the two people shown here. **Ivo**, who has recently been released from mental hospital, is obsessed with the unattainable **Aldina**, whom he equates with the moon. Stumbling upon a rave to Michael Jackson music in an abandoned warehouse, he tries a shoe that he has stolen from Aldina on a number of random women, and is overjoyed that it fits in each case. Meanwhile the other man, **Gonnella**, a city official who has been fired on account of his rising paranoia, sees the woman of *his* dreams, and miraculously calms the crowd into watching them dance an old-fashioned waltz. As a said, mania and sweetness; each would be too much on its own, but juxtaposed like this they almost work. I have cut about two minutes in the middle.

32. Fellini: *The Voice of the Moon*, dance sequence

33. Poster for *A Prairie Home Companion*

I suppose all those of us who listened to **Garrison Keillor’s** *A Prairie Home Companion* over the years knew that the show was broadcast live every week from the Fitzgerald Theater in Saint Paul, but I certainly never stopped to think what a live radio show would actually look like. So that was one of the fascinations of the Robert Altman film. But the main one was seeing the casual atmosphere backstage, something that rings entirely true to me from my experience in real theater. I am going to play two short clips back to back. The first is the lead-up to the start of the show. You will see Keillor, of course, but also **Meryl Streep** and **Lily Tomlin** as the singing Johnson Sisters, Yolanda and Rhonda, accompanied by Yolanda’s daughter Lola (**Lindsay Lohan**). Then we cut to the very end of the show, where the usual routine is interrupted by a surprise debut number by the daughter Lola. Then all join hands in a chorus of *Red River Valley*; although the theater audience does not yet know it, but the cast does, this will be their last show.

34. Altman: *A Prairie Home Companion*, start and end of the last show

D. All the World's a Stage

35. Section title D (Verdi and *Falstaff*)

Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) thought he had retired with *Aïda*, which premiered in 1870, when he was 57. But his publisher **Ricordi** began a long matchmaking process of getting him together with him to fellow-composer **Arrigo Boïto** (1842–1918). The master finally succumbed, and the result was *Otello*, which premiered in 1886, when he was 73. A further eight years were to pass before the final fruit of this partnership, and this was truly an old-age transformation. For, though sticking with Shakespeare, Verdi turned to comedy, an adaptation—and immense improvement on—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*. He called it *Falstaff*; by the time of the premiere in 1893, he was 80.

36. *Falstaff*, list of scenes

I said *Falstaff* was an improvement over the Shakespeare; I could have said in three ways. First, although it maintains an atmosphere of gossamer light-heartedness throughout, it is not without its moments of weight and darkness. Second, it has moments of true lyrical beauty, whereas *Merry Wives* is just about the only play without quotable verse passages at all. And third, Boïto achieved a masterpiece of compression, cutting the cast list in half, eliminating most of the subplots, and greatly reducing the number of episodes. He cast it in three acts with two scenes in each. I shall play two of them: the complete **Garden Scene** which, although Falstaff himself never appears, is the most consistently fleet-footed of all, and which also includes some of the most lyrical music; and I shall end with the final scene in **Windsor Forest**, almost complete, because it has the greatest musical range of any in the opera.

37. — the above, highlighting the Garden scene

I mentioned before that a frequent *LateStyle* characteristic is the relaxation of formal constraints. Not so with Verdi. Instead of playing fast and loose with form, he doubles down on it. The Garden Scene contains a number of short episodes, which he connects by mathematically precise tempo-markings, so that each plays in some sub-multiple of the one before. Furthermore, he constructs the whole scene as a giant **palindrome**, as I hope this little video will make clear; I made it for use with a different production, so the singers and settings are not the same, but that should not matter. Then on to a performance of the complete scene from Covent Garden, conducted by **Carlo Maria Giulini**.

38. Garden Scene palindrome demo

39. Verdi: *Falstaff*, Act I, scene 2 complete

40. Scene breakdown, highlighting the Windsor Forest scene

So here is the context of the final scene. Falstaff has been lured to his tryst with Alice Ford, hidden in a laundry basket when Mr. Ford himself arrives, and finally dumped into the River Thames. Just as he is drying out at the start of Act III, Mistress Quickly, the ladies' go-between, arrives and invites him to one further meeting at midnight at Herne's Oak in Windsor Forest. He is to arrive as the ghost of Herne the Hunter, a mythological figure. Meanwhile, the ladies prepare for a midsummer night's masquerade, and

Ford plans to take the opportunity to marry his daughter Nannetta to the elderly but rich Doctor Caius. The scene as a whole is not so tightly constructed as the one in the garden, but each episode has its distinct musical flavor, as I hope the following will make clear. The painting, by **George Cruickshank**, is of a 19th-century production of the play. Then we will go straight to the production itself. The main cast is **Renato Bruson** (Falstaff), **Katia Ricciarelli** (Alice), **Barbara Hendricks** (Nannetta), and **Dalmacio Gonzalez** (Fenton). **Ronald Eyre** is the stage director, and the designer **Hayden Griffin** also did the sets for my very first production in London (*The Barber of Seville*) years earlier.

41. Windsor Forest breakdown demo

42. Verdi: *Falstaff*, Act III, scene 2, from the entrance of Falstaff

43. Final title (JOY!)