

The BobCasts



Episode 1

Yours For a Song

Welcome everyone. I'm Bob Greenberg, Music Historian-in-Residence for San Francisco Performances, and the title of this BobCast is *Yours for a Song*.

Okay; I said that: "BobCast". What noive, you say! Yes, perhaps I should be embarrassed, even ashamed to interpolate my name into such an otherwise time-honored term; "BobCast" indeed! In my defense, I would tell you that the term is not of my invention but rather, that of my colleagues at San Francisco Performances. But as it turns out, I really like it! So I stand before you, unembarrassed and unashamed!

BobCast. On we go.

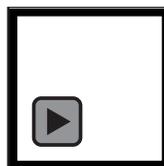
We contemplate the word "song".

Such a simple word; easy to say, easy to spell. A word that every single one of us has used at some point or another and can, or so each one of us thinks, properly define.

And therein lies the problem with the word "song": it does, in fact, mean too many different things to too many different people, many of those things INCORRECT.

For example. For many good and otherwise well-intentioned individuals, the word "song" can mean virtually any kind of music, from a child singing to herself while at play, to a sonata for piano, a symphony, a concerto, even an opera.

"I really dig that Beethoven song, you know, like, the one about his favorite fruit: 'Ba-na-nah'."

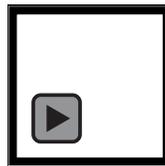


Beethoven, Symphony No. 5, movement 1, Giuliani

We forgive this misuse for the same reason we forgive the aforementioned child for wiping her snot on the front of her romper, and that's because many folks simply don't know any better: the ubiquitous presence of popular songs in our mass media culture has served to convince them that any piece of music is a "song."
Well, it is most surely not.

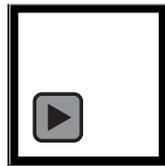
Defined as simply and as broadly as possible, a song is some collection of words or speech sounds—a poem, a prayer, a spontaneous verbal outburst, gibberish, or the menu from your local Thai take-out restaurant—set to music. Whether those words set to music are accompanied by one or more musical instruments depends upon when, where, and for whom the song was created. So:

Song:



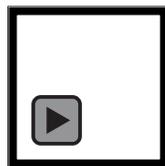
Mahler, Songs of a Wayfarer, Ging Heut' Morgan Ubers Felt, Fischer-Dieskau

Not song:



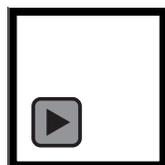
Beethoven, Symphony No. 5, movement 1, Giulini

Song:



Ohio Express, Yummy, Yummy, Yummy

Not Song:



Anton Webern, Variations for Piano, Op. 27, variation 2, Pollini

Singing is a primal human activity, and our ancestors learned countless millennia ago that singing (or chanting) words deepens immeasurably the expressive meaning and impact of those

words. From the beginning of human time we have used song to lull our babies to sleep and to go to war; to organize our work routines and attract a mate; to march to and to dance to; to praise our gods; and to amuse each other and ourselves.

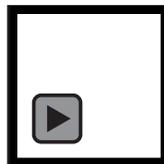
Our impulse to sing is hardwired into us; singing is one of the principal ways we process our environment and our emotions. So song—as a spontaneous, experiential thing—has always been with us.

But, boo-hoo for us, we can't know what the vast amount of human song sounds like because the vast majority of it wasn't notated. And when song did begin to be notated—by the ancient Greeks and Romans—it was notated on impermanent media (on papyrus, on freakin' paper), and thus the songs of the Greek and Roman world have been almost entirely lost as well.

It wasn't until the Renaissance—the 1400s and 1500s—that something as prosaic as secular “song” was once again considered worthy of being consistently notated. The songs that were notated were not transcriptions from the oral tradition—folk songs, love songs, student songs and so forth—but rather, newly composed songs, in which the skills of a poet and the craft of a composer were joined.

Our understanding of what constitutes a song today—a poem of some sort, set to music consisting of *one melody line*, and accompanied by one or more instruments—developed in Italy during the Renaissance, during the late 1500s. The writers of these songs were convinced that by setting “elevated” poetry to music sung by *a single voice* they were following in the footsteps of the ancient Greeks, who claimed that their *monadic* (meaning one vocal part) music could move the hearts of people and animals and veritably change the face of nature!

Here's an example of just such late-Renaissance “monadic music”, Emilio de'Cavalieri's *From the Highest Spheres*, composed in 1589 and published in 1591.



Emilio de'Cavalieri's From the Highest Spheres

Well, we can't speak to the hearts of animals or the face of nature, but we can comfortably say that this new, highly literate, NOTATED, one-voice-plus accompaniment style of music, music that allowed a solo singer to express the feelings behind the words, changed the face of Western culture, because it led to the invention of opera during the first years of the seventeenth century.

By 1600, composed songs were being written for both professional and amateur performers. In seventeenth century Italy and Germany, such a song was called an *aria*; in France an *air*; in England an *ayre*, A-Y-R-E.

By the nineteenth century, German language composers had come to dominate the genre of song. Here's why.

The German language—as a result of its short vowels and powerful, often even harsh articulation—demands to be set to music *syllabically*, which means one note per syllable. In this, German is the antithesis of the Italian language, the language of opera, in which long, gorgeous vowels and relatively soft consonants allow for long and complex melodies based on *melisma*: the singing of many pitches to a single syllable.

The German language—with its explosive consonants and vowels so short as to be able to stroll upright under any limbo bar—was for centuries considered to be a vocally *inferior* language by a European musical community preconditioned to a singing-style evolved from the properties of the Italian language.

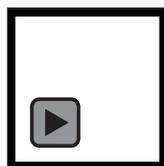
It was during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that a vocal art form evolved in German-speaking Europe that was indeed based on the idiosyncrasies of the German language. You see, with its syllabic musical setting and explosively clear articulation, the German language—if not suited to the *bel canto* singing style of the Italian language—was perfectly suited for description and story telling. The speech-like clarity that results when setting German (and for that matter, English) to music makes German (and English) ideal for *song*.

Far more than any other nineteenth century German composer, it was Franz Schubert, “the little mushroom” as his friends called him, all 5’ of him, whose 630-plus songs (or *lieder*) defined forever the expressive and musical possibilities of the song. The great German-language composers of song that followed him—Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, Hugo Wolff, Gustav Mahler, and Arnold Schoenberg—built on Schubert’s work, creating a body of song that represents one of the great legacies of Western art.

That legacy will be well-explored during San Francisco Performances 2020–2021 season. On February 20, 2021, the Austrian mezzo-soprano Angelika Kirchschrager (born 1965) will perform Schubert’s heartbreaking song-cycle *Winterreise* (“Winter’s Journey”) at Herbst Theater. On May 4, 2021, the South African soprano Golda Schultz (born 1984) will perform a program of song with the pianist Jonathan Ware at Herbst.

In closing, we would turn our attention to American song. At an as-of-yet undetermined time in the late spring or summer of 2021, San Francisco Performances hopes to present the American tenor Lawrence Brownlee (born 1972), who will offer up a program of English language, American songs entitled “Crooners—An homage to legendary popular vocalists from the 50s and 60s.”

One of those legendary crooners is Nat “King” Cole (1919–1965), who will draw this “BobCast” to its conclusion with his rendition of the marvelous 1933 song *It’s Only a Paper Moon*, with music by Harold Arlen and words by Yip Harburg and Billy Rose.



Nat Cole, It’s Only a Paper Moon

Thank you.