



## Re: Cycling Songs

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Each year, I endeavour to find a musical topic that will be informative and fun for you to read and equally as much fun for me to write. In recent years I have occasionally dwelt on morbid topics including the more unusual deaths of composers and of operatic characters but, this year, we all need something uplifting. We have lived through eighteen months of fear, loss, and discomfort; we have lost and missed both friends and family.

So, when love does not lift us up where we belong, what does? For me, it's always music. There is music to put you 'in the mood'. What music do I turn to when I need to feel the power of love, when I hate Mondays, when I need a little help from my friends, or when I don't need every day to be forever autumn. Or perhaps what music would I recommend to you so that you can enjoy your perfect day?

It doesn't matter what type of music you like, there is stirring, depressing, and everything in between. I thought about which type of less familiar music could I recommend to Band Club members, and I challenged myself to come up with a list of ten song cycles that would gladden the hearts of any music lover.

What is a song cycle? Generally a true cycle is a set of songs bound to a single narrative. There are some wonderful songs out there which I had to discount because of this, especially by Brahms, Mahler, Moniuszko, and Wolf. The first true song cycle was *An die ferne Geliebte*, by Beethoven, written in 1816. After that followed a plethora of high quality, deeply emotional song cycles; but which to choose? Remembering Carl Sagan's words (when chairing a group to choose music to send into space on Voyager1 and 2, he said that we could just send the works of J. S. Bach, but that would be boasting) I limited myself to only one cycle from any given composer. This was really tough when you consider the output, particularly, of Robert Schumann.

Next I decided to omit the really depressing, laconic, or downright miserable ones. Schubert

wrote some of the greatest songs ever written, but as a single man he went on and on about unrequited love.

Brahms's best stuff includes his *Four Serious Songs*. My favourite song by Hugo Wolf starts 'All must end that has a beginning, all things round us perish, for time is fleeting and the sun sees that all things round us perish'. See what I mean?

The Gramophone magazine published its own list of the ten best song cycles:

- Beethoven: *An die ferne Geliebte*
- Schubert: *Die schöne Müllerin*
- Schubert: *Winterreise*
- Schumann: *Dichterliebe*
- Fauré: *La bonne chanson*
- Mussorgsky: *Songs and Dances of Death*
- Britten: *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*
- Mahler: *Kindertotenlieder*
- Messiaen: *Harawi*
- Vaughan Williams: *Songs of Travel*



**Britten: *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake***

Only one of those makes my list. The Mussorgsky speaks for itself, the Mahler translates as *Songs on the Death of Children*, and *Winterreise* (Winter Journey) has twenty four songs and zero laughs. *Harawi*, a delightful modern work, is a song of love and death. These are for the already-converted.

Is there anything more modern that would appeal to a newbie? I have some favourites among the works of George Crumb (*Ancient Voices of Children, Madrigals, Apparition*), Kalevi Aho (*Chinese Songs*), Libby Larsen (*Sonnets from the Portuguese, Songs of Light and Love, & Try Me, Good King: Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII*) not to mention Jennifer Higdon's *Civil Words*, but they would not be to everyone's taste. Schoenberg's *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* (1909) and *Pierrot lunaire* (1912), and Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître* (1955) are not for the faint-hearted. Henzes' *Voices* and Bernstein's *Songfest* need a much deeper understanding and acceptance of modern idioms. However, if we think outside the box, we come to the concept albums beginning, probably, with Woody Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads* (so not for us here) and moving through the Nelson Riddle orchestrations, which "give each album a composerly coherence" particularly for Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra, until we get to an absolute classic in The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* of 1967. This ticks all the boxes with its collection of songs written for a performance by a fictional band. This was soon followed by many other concept albums by The Moody Blues, Pink Floyd, The Nice, Jon Anderson, Rick Wakeman, and others too numerous to mention.

Which brings me to my recommended listening of song cycles for soothing or uplifting the soul. In alphabetical order I would recommend:

- *Dies Natalis* (Finzi)
- *Four Last Songs* (R. Strauss)
- *Frauenliebe und Leben* (R. Schumann)
- *Gurrelieder* (Schoenberg)
- *Les nuits d'été* (Berlioz)
- *Poème de l'amour et de la mer* (Chausson)
- *Sea Pictures* (Elgar)
- *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (The Beatles)
- *Songs of Travel* (R. Vaughan Williams)
- *Wesendonck Lieder* (Wagner)

If I've convinced you to listen to these and you enjoy song cycles my way, then try:

- *A Shropshire Lad* (Butterworth)
- *Dichterliebe* (Schumann)
- *Five Mystical Songs* (Vaughan Williams)
- *Les Illuminations* (Britten)
- *Liederkreis Op.39* (Schumann)
- *Rückert Lieder* (Mahler)
- *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* (Britten)
- *Shéhérazade* (Ravel)
- *The Juliet Letters* (Elvis Costello/Brodsky Quartet)
- *Winterreise* (Schubert)

... or, of course, anything I've mentioned in my article. Whatever your taste in music, may it bring you joy and comfort in the years to come.



R. Strauss: *Four Last Songs*



G. Mahler: *Rückert Lieder*

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