

Poetical Musicology by Peter Wonson

The first ten minutes of this presentation are unavailable, due to the ineptitude of the presenter. The camera was set up and ready to roll, but Mr. Wonson forgot to turn it on. Fortunately, someone from tech support came back in the room and turned it on. What is missing is the introductory remarks (not memorable) and the first run through of Elton John's "Sixty Years On", repeated a second time on the video so no loss.

I believe poetry can take many forms: a Roger Arvid Anderson sculpture, Mikhail Baryshnikov soaring above the stage, LeBron James soaring across his hardwood stage, Dylan Thomas or Bob Dylan. There was a classic teen idol song some of you may remember by Johnny Tillotson, from November of 1960, our freshman year in high school, "Poetry in Motion" – about a guy's lithesome girlfriend.

Poetry can be simple or complex, it doesn't have to rhyme, it can be fun or frivolous as easily as melancholy or ponderous. Robert Frost, who wrote in simple, everyday language, said of poetry: "I think we come to poetry from Mother Goose up – rhymes, meter, wit, insight, cleverness." Frost also said: "A poem intimates something beyond itself. Saying one thing and meaning another; saying one thing in terms of another. It seeks kindred spirits by suggesting something beyond itself." One school of thought says that the beauty of poetry is that there is no "right" answer (and I believe the same thing about song lyrics)...a poem may have different levels and meanings, especially if its audience is varied.

For me, when poetry is set to music it is transported into a completely new dimension. This presentation features two fine musical poets – Elton John (actually Bernie Taupin) and Bruce Hornsby, both classically-trained pianists. In the forty-five years I have done this presentation I have featured twelve different artists, but Elton and Bruce are my go-to guys, probably because of their background, which leads them to write layered, somewhat "symphonic" songs. Some rock music, like virtually every art form, is fun and perhaps even interesting, but not very deep or very sophisticated or very intelligent. Think "Louie, Louie" by The Kingsmen! Some of it, on the other hand, has actual musical and literary merit. For me, John and Hornsby fall into the latter category.

As we work with three songs this afternoon, keep in mind the following questions:

What is the topic or subject of the song?

What "type" of song is this?

What is the mood of the song?

How does the music help convey the written message?

Are there specific images or key phrases that strike you as especially significant?