

Introduction

What Is a Ballad?

What is a ballad? The question kicked off an episode of the TV show *Glee* devoted to the songs.¹ Simply called “Ballad,” it opens with glee club instructor Mr. Schuester asking choir members just that. One student throws his arm up in the air and answers: “a ballad is a love song.” Mr. Schuester agrees but adds that the songs are not just about love. As he puts it, ballads are “stories set to music.” Not only that, they are also “the perfect storm of self expression.” I too have begun lectures about ballads with that question and have received a range of responses. “Love songs” is the most popular answer, followed by sad songs. Sometimes you get personal tales garlanded around those replies, like “the kind of song that was playing when I met my girlfriend” or “the songs that I listen to when I’m depressed.” Then there is always the unexpected: “the songs that my Mom likes,” “the songs that I turn off on the radio as soon as I hear them,” and “pretty songs.”

These disparate responses show that we need to settle upon a definition. Everyone has a general idea about ballads – romantic or sad songs that can be very personal – but they find it hard to pin down that idea. This is often the case when we are asked to define the ubiquitous things around us, like concrete or electricity. We see or use these things every day, but never stop to think what exactly they are or how we would capture them in words. Ballads are that common. There are usually one or two of them around the top of the charts and they number among our favorite songs, at least for readers of this book. We know one when we hear one, but we never stop to think exactly what we know about them. So to get things started, I will provide a concise definition: A ballad is a song set to a slow tempo that deals with feelings of love and loss.

I will fill out that definition as we go along, but let’s begin with a discussion of the term “ballad.” It is an unusual term in popular music

¹ The episode aired on 18 November 2009.

because it has been around for centuries and has been used in different ways. “Blues” and “rock” may be venerable names in popular music, but they are fledglings compared to “ballad.” To his credit, Mr. Schuester opens his rehearsal with an etymology lesson, telling the class that “ballad” comes from a Middle English term. Not exactly. There are Latin and Middle French precedents, but we do not need to quibble with Mr. Schuester or descend into the etymological mines. The important thing for us is that by the Middle Ages there is a type of song called ballad, one that is still around today, although it is not the type that we will be looking at.

This other kind of ballad arose from the age-old act of storytelling. The lyrics narrate tales, which are presented in a sequence of stanzas. The stanzas are set to the same music, repetitions that made the songs easier to remember for the singers and to pass on through following generations. The songs took up treasured topics, including religious stories, battles, supernatural incidents, and romance. Especially grisly are murder ballads, which recount the events leading up to a killing, the act itself, and the aftermath. The popularity of murder ballads in the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals how established the narrative ballad had become in American musical life. The songs were central to different folk traditions, particularly those of the Appalachians and West, and, when polished up, could also be heard in domestic parlors and concert halls.

The narrative ballad enjoyed renewed attention with the folk-revival movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1958, the Kingston Trio captivated audiences with the murder ballad “Tom Dooley.” Bob Dylan turned to the ballad, although with tales far more poetic and enigmatic than those in folk songs. With a cast of characters including a “one-eyed midget” and “lumberjacks,” “Ballad of a Thin Man” (1965) tells a story about alienation, although, as a line in the chorus says, “you don’t know what it is.” The folk-revival movement appears to have been the last hurrah for the narrative ballad. The songs, though, are still with us. Whenever I ask my classes what a ballad is, one student without fail mentions the narrative ballad. Even the *Glee* episode nods to those songs with the line that ballads are “stories set to music.”

The love-song type of ballad that we know emerges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but even then it is hard to spot. It gets lost among other kinds of ballads, including the narrative songs. There were a lot of different types of ballads back then, or rather disparate songs that fit under the heading “ballad.” A look at songwriting manuals from the

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early twentieth century reveals a map of musical genres unlike the one that we use for our listening journeys. Today, we define genres largely, but not exclusively, on the basis of style, which produces a map that consists of different genre countries, each with distinct styles and sounds, like R&B, punk, and electronic dance music. Back in the early twentieth century, the map consisted of large continents, made up of types of songs. There were three chief categories of songs: ballad, novelty song, and rhythm song. The divisions between the three were made along the lines of the topic of lyrics, mood, language, and musical characteristics. Novelty songs like “Yes, We Have No Bananas” dealt with comic topics and used slang or colloquial language. Ballads, on the other hand, turned to more serious topics, above all romance, and used simple language, with occasional poetic plumes. True to the name, rhythm songs excited listeners with catchy rhythms, often those derived from ragtime or early jazz, and featured fast tempos. If those infectious beats were not enough billing, the tunes often placed “rhythm” in the title, like Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm” and “Fascinating Rhythm.” Ballads were by comparison rhythmically demure, using straightforward, steady rhythms and set to a slow tempo. Syncopated rhythms, of course, pepped up ballads, enough to warrant a particular subcategory, what composer Arthur Korb called the “rhythm ballad.”²

The ballad had many subcategories at this time, more than rhythm or novelty songs. As one scholar of musical theatre put it: “Ballads, as a rubric, cover on Broadway a multitude of sins.”³ He was not talking about the romantic peccadillos described in love songs but rather the number of different types of songs called ballads, some of which emerged from the mixing of different kinds of songs, like the mongrel rhythm ballad. In his 1949 book *How to Write Songs that Sell*, Korb’s brood of ballads not only includes the rhythm ballad but also the “regular” ballad, the slow foxtrot, the foxtrot in a slightly faster tempo, and the slow waltz.⁴ The breakdown of the ballad in E.M. Wickes’ 1916 *Writing the Popular Song* gives us an even more unusual cast of characters: march, semi-high class, rustic, waltz, Irish, descriptive, and mother ballads.⁵

² Arthur Korb, *How to Write Songs that Sell* (New York: Greenberg Publishers, 1949), 22–23.

³ Isaac Goldberg, *Tin Pan Alley: A Chronicle of the American Popular Music Racket* (New York: The John Day Company, 1930), 213.

⁴ Korb, *How to Write Songs that Sell*, 22–23.

⁵ E.M. Wickes, *Writing the Popular Song* (Springfield, MA: The Home Correspondence School, 1916), 6.

Instead of talking about these individual and mostly defunct types of ballads (RIP), we will consider what the ballad in general was. In the songwriting manuals, it comes across as a genre blob that occupies a third or more of the popular music world and contains a multitude of offshoots. We might not recognize this blob conception of the ballad, but our present-day idea of the ballad was part of it. Slow songs about love and loss were always in the mix. During the course of the 1920s and 1930s, the chaff of march, descriptive, and semi-high class songs disappeared. Songwriting manuals of the 1940s offer definitions that jibe with the one that we will be building upon. In his *Secrets of Successful Song Writing*, Harry Stoddard describes the ballad as a song that is “usually written in a slow tempo, and has a smooth, melodious, romantic, and appealing melody. The lyric is concerned with romance, lovers, and memories.”⁶ He then goes on to divide the ballad into three categories: the love song, sentimental ballad, and torch song.

I will also be dividing the ballad repertoire into different categories, some based on genres (soul, hip hop, rock), some on expressive qualities (power ballads), and others on cultural oppositional lines (indie vs. mainstream). A hundred years from now, a scholar may point out how odd those divisions seem, as I did with Wickes’ list. His list and mine, though, make the point that there is no such thing as one type of ballad. Nor is there anymore such a thing as the broad ballad that encompasses a large chunk of the popular music scene. It was good that we got to look at that conception of the ballad, though, for it shows us what the ballad was and allows us to appreciate even more what it would become in the 1950s, the starting point of our history of the ballad.

The Music

A history of the term “ballad” only goes so far in telling us what a ballad is. We need to get into the music and lyrics of the songs. As for the music, we will break down the ballad into six different areas: melody, harmony, instrumental accompaniment, form, tempo, and rhythm. Each not only shapes what a ballad is but also adds to the emotional spells cast by the songs.

Ballads are all about melody, a point made by Harry Stoddard’s definition mentioned above, which emphasizes melody by describing it with four adjectives: smooth, melodious, romantic, and appealing. I would agree

⁶ Harry Stoddard. *Secrets of Successful Song Writing* (Los Angeles: The Bookman Press, 1949), 14.

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with that list (although I could do without melodious melody), and I will throw in many more adjectives to describe the melodic lines in the songs as we go along. But for now, I will begin with this observation: melodies are front and center in ballads. How can they not be? The songs are all about singers and the melodies that they sing. The other parts – piano, strings, horns – do not pile on top of the vocal line. Ballads do not have the intricate layering of individual lines that we find in a funk song. The other parts usually stay in the background. The prominence of the melody has made many singers afraid of ballads, for there is no place to hide. Bad notes or weak breath control will be exposed.

The same elements that make ballad melodies fearsome also make them enchanting, particularly the length and shapes of the vocal lines. Ballads spin out long lines, or, as heard in The Righteous Brothers' hit, they unchain melodies, allowing them to flow, build, and arabesque. Any genre extolling voice and melody tends toward melodic extravagance, as is the case with nineteenth-century Italian opera. The composer Giuseppe Verdi described his predecessor Vincenzo Bellini's works as having "long, long, long melodies."⁷ Whether in a ballad or aria, extended melodies show what a singer can – or cannot – do and also grip listeners. Such a melody allures us with a lovely opening phrase and from then on we want to follow it, or glide along with it. We want to become part of all the twists and turns that the melody takes. Long melodies also draw us in by prolonging and deepening a mood. A short phrase for "I love you" can be touching, but an unfurling melody can give us a love story. In eight bars, a melody can evoke a drama of conflict with a pleasant romantic ending or draw out sadness.

The Carpenters' recording of "Goodbye to Love" (1972) builds upon a long melodic phrase, using it to enhance a "woe-is-me" love story. Richard Carpenter wrote the music and John Bettis the lyrics about a woman convinced that she will never find love. How important that long melody is to the song comes through with Karen Carpenter singing the opening notes of the melody alone. There is no instrumental introduction, just Karen and the melody. The orchestra soon enters and provides plush backing for her voice. The melody is eight bars long and proceeds without a rest until there is a short break in the seventh bar. Richard said that Karen needed "three lungs full" of air to sing it. As to be expected, she

⁷ Mary Ann Smart, et al. "Bellini, Vincenzo." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.* Oxford University Press www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/02603.

pulls off the melody effortlessly; air never seems to be a problem and her tone remains rich and lucent throughout. As in all Carpenters recordings, Karen's voice pulls us in to the song. Richard's melody does too. We get caught up in the melody, as it never comes to a harmonic rest until the last bar (most melodies would reach a resolution at the midway point). We cannot come to a rest until then either. Richard throws in dramatic touches as well. Abundantly mellifluous, Carpenters songs generally avoid strong dissonances. Richard, though, places a brief, yet incisive, one on the "no" of "no one" in the line about how no one really cares about the singer. At the end of the melody beginning on the words "know of," he quickly ascends over an octave to build tension and underscore Karen singing about how all she knows about love is that she will never have it. Richard recalled that he must have been listening to Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky when writing the song. Perhaps so, because like those two Romantic composers, he realized that it takes a long melody to capture longing.⁸

The melodies in ballads not only tend to be long but they also have shapes. They curve up and down, which makes them all the more appealing. For an example of these arches, let's stay in the early 1970s and turn to Barbra Streisand's recording of "The Way We Were" (1973). Like "Goodbye to Love," the song tells us upfront that it is all about melody. There are a few notes on the piano and then the melody appears, with Streisand humming it. Just the melody, no words. Without the lyrics, we can appreciate the shape of Marvin Hamlisch's melody. It begins with a drawn-out descent down a step, which creates this feeling of savoring a thought as the first note slowly resolves to the second one. After that we have two billowing phrases. The first floats up and then quickly moves down by step before coming to a rest on a sustained note. The second rises over a greater range and draws out the descent. The billowing evokes a sensation that the lyrics, when they appear, will clarify. By pushing us toward the peak of a phrase, the ascents suggests that we are pushing toward a goal or experience, like, as captured in the lyrics, getting closer to a past romance through memory. The memories may seem so close, but we will fall back into the bleakness of the present, just as the phrases fall back to notes lower than where the ascents began.

For all the extended, curvilinear melodies in ballads, there are also short, repetitive one-or-two note tunes. Those piecemeal melodies, though, can

⁸ "'40/40' Celebrates The Carpenters' 1969 Debut," *Fresh Air*, NPR (25 November 2009) www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120760959.

be just as expressive as the long-limbed ones. Such melodies are common in African American music, which builds upon declamatory, speech-like vocals in a range of genres, like the talking passages in blues or the shouting in gospel. As we will see with soul ballads in Chapter 2, Otis Redding shaves down melodies to one or two notes and then repeats them over and over, all part of the moods of romantic fervor and desperation that he creates in his ballads. James Brown's "Please, Please, Please" (1956) is even blunter about desperation. There was probably no other title for the song, which includes passages in which Brown sings "please" again and again as he begs his lover not to leave him. Not only is there just one word but it is also often presented on one note. A master of making the most out of seemingly little, Brown smears the repeated note with various vocal sounds and rhythmically bobs it around in different places in the measure. We never know if Brown's lover stays or not, but we want to stay with him and listen to him pour out those colorful pleas.

Long or short, melodies remain notes on a page or a tune in someone's head without voices to render them. This book will discuss the one-of-a-kind voices that have enriched the history of the ballad, like those of Karen Carpenter, Barbra Streisand, Otis Redding, and James Brown. I will deal with these unique voices as they come up in that history and describe, say, what makes Whitney Houston's voice so remarkable and what she did with her ballads. For the time being, I would like to make a simple, yet important, observation. No matter how unique the voices of these singers, they all bring out one point about why voices are so important to ballads. Voices create the intimate human connection between singer and listener that is at the heart of the experience of listening to ballads. Jazz instrumentalists like Miles Davis and John Coltrane obviously move listeners with their ballad performances, but a voice – that most human of sounds – creates a strong connection, especially when that voice can tell us about romance or sorrow through words. When I ask people about their experiences listening to ballads, they often say that they have felt that a singer was right next to them and that he or she was talking to them. There is perhaps no more touching compliment for a singer than that. So in describing voices later on, we will not only consider the distinct vocal styles of different artists but also the different types of intimacy that they create with listeners.

For now, let's continue our discussion of the musical properties of the ballad by turning to the sounds around those melodies and voices, particularly the harmonies in a song and the instruments accompanying a singer. When it comes to harmony, I will keep it simple. The important thing is to hear changes in harmony, which is not difficult to do in a ballad

for several reasons. First of all, slow tempos make it easier to hear chords change; unlike the whirl of harmonies in fast tempo pieces, as in the bebop works of Charlie Parker. Second, there are usually many chord changes in ballads, or more so than in the average up-tempo song. Like a bridge stretching across a wide bay, the long melodies of ballads must be supported; one or two chords are not enough to hold them up across so many bars. The chords not only provide support but also add rich harmonic colors to bring out key words or beguiling melodic turns. Having said that, there are many wonderful ballads that use only a few chords. Alicia Keys' "Fallin'" (2001), for example, alternates between just two chords and is far from being musically or emotionally impoverished.

Emotions are another reason for the emphasis on harmony in ballads. Changes in chords can set up reflective or dramatic moments. To go back to a classic, Cole Porter calls attention to such a moment in his "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" (1944) with the line "how strange the change from major to minor." The chords do indeed change from major to minor (that is as technical as we will get in talking about harmony) and, in doing so, convey how quickly feelings can turn from bliss to sorrow when a lover departs. In "Stay" (2012), recorded by Rihanna and Mikky Ekko, the contrast between major and minor chords brings out one lover's anxieties about asking the other to stay and be part of his or her life. With just a piano for the accompaniment, the changes in harmony are easy to hear. The lover has pondered his or her decision, as caught in the chords for the verse, which move from an opening major chord, suggestive of some sort of happiness or hopefulness, and then conclude with a repeated minor chord, the persistent doubts from which the lover cannot break free. In the chorus, the lover realizes how empty his or her life has been and how much he or she needs their partner, a thought that takes us on a harmonic route that begins with a major chord and passes through two minor chords before ending on a major chord. The peace brought out through that realization, however, fades away with the concluding line of the chorus: "I want you stay." It ends with the repeated minor chords heard at the end of the verse. Doubts and anxieties drum on.

Besides the contrast between major and minor chords, songwriters have turned to rich chords for expressive effect. The standard chords in popular music contain three notes. One or two additional notes create harmonies with more color and depth. Jazz musicians have used them for that reason, as have ballad composers. The harmonies form a vivid backdrop that sets off melodies and voices. Ballad composers have also relied on these chords to generate sensations of warmth, feelings crucial to the songs. Ballads

comfort you during both the bliss of falling in love and, especially, heart-break. You can sink into these lush chords, finding there the warmth that you need. With a background in jazz, Burt Bacharach knew these types of chords well and he also knew how to use the warmth that they create. In “(They Long to Be) Close to You” (1963), you want to cozy up to those chords as much as you do your new love. With “A House Is Not a Home” (1964), there is no one to console the lover alone in the “gloom” of an empty house, but lonely listeners can find some comfort in the flow of rich chords running throughout the song. The house may be empty, but, touched by those harmonies, the music and our feelings are anything but.

Bacharach’s house also gets quite loud. Produced by Bacharach and lyricist Hal David, Dionne Warwick’s recording features a large string section and backup singers. Rather than making a racket in that empty house, they create more warmth. The backing adds to the richness of the harmonies. When Warwick delivers the despairing line “I’m not fit to live alone,” the strings and backup singers stretch out swathes of sumptuous sounds, which become more so the second time she sings it. With those rich sounds and harmonies, we are far from being alone in listening to her plaint.

Once again with ballads, there is the musically opposite yet just as emotionally powerful alternative. Some ballads use two chords instead of strings of harmonies, and then there are those for voice and one instrument rather than a full orchestra. We have already discussed such a sparse song – “Stay,” which was among a flock of piano ballads when it came out, including Adele’s “Someone Like You” (2011), Bruno Mars’ “When I Was Your Man” (2013), and John Legend’s “All of Me” (2013). As with other piano ballads, these songs capture listeners through directness. There is nothing between us and the singer and pianist. The music has been stripped of anything superfluous – no sheen of strings or backup singers here – and the singer has nothing to hide behind and tells us how he or she really feels.

The film for Beyoncé’s album *Lemonade* (2016) stages the intimate spaces created by piano ballads. The album features two songs that begin as piano ballads before adding other layers: “Pray You Catch Me” and “Sandcastles.” “Pray You Catch Me” is the only episode in the film for Beyoncé alone. She needs that solitude to confront suspicions that her husband Jay Z has been unfaithful, thoughts that for now can only go as far as “whispering.” She wants to hear him whisper something about his infidelity and to have him realize that she hears him. That would be some form of intimacy, as it is for us as Beyoncé sings softly so that we

come close and listen to her confess her fears and hurt. After scenes with Beyoncé surrounded by dancers, musicians, and actors, “Sandcastles” returns to Beyoncé alone, sitting at a keyboard and singing the song. She is in what could be her and her husband’s house, but now in the desolate disarray created by a breakup. With the heavy piano chords and ringing ache in her voice, she moves into a more private space, memories of her and Jay Z together. Or are they dreams of them reunited, as she broaches the idea of getting back together with him. Using a range of genres to testify to the strength and sacrifices of African American women and to protest the racial injustices past and present in American history, *Lemonade* turns to the piano ballad for secluded moments of sorrow and hope.

Whenever I ask a class to tell me what a ballad is, a student usually says that it is a form, or the way a song is put together. I am always pleased to hear this response because it gives me a chance to make an important point. The ballad is not a form, meaning that it is not a structure that all ballads use and only ballads. Ballads instead build upon a form that can be heard in a range of popular music genres. That form consists of two sections: verse and chorus. Ballads employ this basic form in different ways. “The Way We Were,” for example, has a chorus and bridge, but no verse. It discards the verse in order to get right to Streisand humming the tune that everyone knows. Her humming sets up the song perhaps better than any verse about memories and lost love could. “Stay,” on the other hand, has a verse, chorus, bridge, and pre-chorus.

Slow

All ballads have one thing in common: a slow tempo. Ballads can deal with different topics, from the sparkle of first love to the death of a partner. They can also appear across a range of genres, including pop, country, R&B, and rock. They all, though, use a slow tempo. As important as slow tempos are, they are the least discussed and understood musical element in ballads. So there is a lot to say about slow tempos and to do so, we will slow down and take some time to discuss slow.

The first thing to say about slow is that it is different. It stands out. It is not the norm. What is the norm? As a cliché about modern life tells us, the world has become so fast, and we are all busy. The train and car accelerated life and then the computer and smartphone turned it into a whirlwind. Want to fight the bustle? Then you could take hours to cook a meal, or if you are rushed and do not have the time for that, then you could buy a lovely artisanal cheese, a dish that someone else took a long time to