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Introduction

Music and poetry were a more important part of everyday life in the early twentieth century than they are now. A century ago, singing was more than mere entertainment—it was an essential component of social life. Popular music was not so passively consumed as today, but much more a participatory activity. By purchasing the colorfully illustrated sheet music produced by a legion of commercial music enterprises, ordinary folks performed the latest hit songs for themselves in their own home or civic hall. It was not even necessary for singers to read music or have a good voice to join in group singing, and nothing worked so effectively to draw people together and create bonds of mutual understanding. Singing was essential to faith and worship, but also to recreation, courtship, politics and commerce. In war, it had the power to rally people to the cause, hearten lonely and downcast soldiers, lampoon the absurdities of war, lament pain and loss, and console broken hearts. Our forebears expressed themselves in song, and no understanding of their experience is complete without hearing their voices.

This program offers a variety of British, American, Canadian, and Australian popular music from the trenches and home front, along with historical commentary. Following a roughly chronological framework, it offers a perspective on the changing moods and perceptions as one of history’s great tragedies unfolded.

Program

It’s a Long Way to Tipperary

(Britain, 1912)

Words and Music by Jack Judge and Harry Williams

Arranged by Ian Assersohn

In Britain particularly, this is the quintessential song of the First World War, though ironically, it was not strictly speaking a war song. It’s a Long Way to Tipperary was published and recorded in 1912 and was later adopted by British soldiers as a rousing marching song. Its success reflects in part the power of the emerging popular music industry, which through sheet music and gramophone recordings, was establishing the foundations of a national and even international popular culture. It’s a Long Way to Tipperary has a catchy tune, but also expresses the sense of distance from home and hopes of return. It became less popular as the war dragged on, and soldiers were feeling far less optimistic. Tonight’s version includes a slightly naughty example of the countless new verses added by marching soldiers when they reached France.

It’s a long way to Tipperary; it’s a long way to go
It’s a long way to Tipperary to the sweetest girl I know
Goodbye, Picadilly. Farewell Leicester Square
It’s a long, long way to Tipperary, but my heart’s right there
That’s the wrong way to tickle Mary, it the wrong way to kiss
Don’t you know that over here, lad, they like it best like this?
Hooray pour le Francais, farewell Angleterre!
We didn’t know the way to tickle Mary, but we learned it over there

Your King and Country Want You

(Britain, 1914)
Words and Music by Paul A. Rubens

The subtitle of this piece, “A Woman’s Recruiting Song,” forthrightly declares the importance that the British government placed on the role of women in building commitment to the war. This is one way in which the government called upon women to compel men to live up to their masculine calling. Your King and Country Want You is the musical equivalent of the famous poster of mustachioed Lord Kitchener pointing at the viewer and declaring, “Your Country Needs YOU!”

We’ve watched you playing cricket
And every kind of game.
At football, golf and polo
You men have made your name.
But now your country calls you
To play your part in war
And no matter what befalls you
We will love you all the more.
So come and join the forces
As your fathers did before

Refrain:

Oh we don’t want to lose you, but we think you ought to go
For your king and country both need you so.
We shall want you and miss you, but with all our might and main
We shall cheer you, thank you, kiss you
When you come back again

We want you from all quarters
So help us, South and North.
We want you in your thousands
From Falmouth to the Forth
You’ll never find us fail you
When you are in distress
So answer when we hail you
And let your word be, “Yes”
And so your name in years to come
Each mother’s son shall bless

It’s easy for us women
To stay at home and shout
But remember, there’s a duty
To the men who first went out
The odds against that handful
Were nearly four to one
And we cannot rest until
It’s man for man, and gun for gun!
And ev’ry woman’s duty
Is to see that duty done!

I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier

(U.S., 1915)

Words: Alfred Bryan
Music: Al Piantadosi

As war raged in Europe in 1915, this song was a big hit in America, selling 650,000 copies in just three months.[1] Lyricist Alfred Bryan not only invokes traditional values of home and motherhood, but also makes the rather progressive appeal to mothers to take a political stand against war. President Wilson’s declared policy of staying out of war, and the establishment of a League of Peace, reflected the general American sentiment of the time. Some school teachers and principals used the song to spread the gospel of peace. The New York Tribune reported in the spring of 1915 that one New York City principal taught to his entire school, to the alarm of a visiting army officer, who complained to the Board of Education.[2]

Ten million soldiers to the war have gone
Who may never return again
Ten million mothers’ hears must break
For the ones who died in vain
Head bowed down in sorrow
In her lonely years
I heard a mother murmur through her tears:

Chorus

“I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier
I brought him up to be my pride and joy
Who dares to place a musket on his shoulder
To shoot some other mother’s darling boy?
Let nations arbitrate their future troubles
It’s time to lay the sword and gun away
There’d be no war today
If mothers all would say
‘I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier.’”

What victory can cheer a mother’s heart
When she looks at her blighted home?
What victory can bring her back
All she cared to call her own?
Let each mother answer in the years to be
“Remember that my boy belongs to me!”

Chorus

Goodbye and Luck Be with You Laddie Boy

(US, 1917)

Words: Will D. Cobb
Music: Gus Edwards

This popular ditty reflects the about-face in American attitudes once war was declared. Now mothers and sisters were telling their sons to risk their lives for glory and to think of home when the “shells begin to sing.”

War is in the air
Blare bugles blare
Drums beat the loud roll call
Hark! Down the street, tramp of feet
Up go the windows all
North and South, East and West
Forth they come, the country’s best
Never mind that parting tear
Let there be one parting cheer

Chorus

Goodbye and luck be with you Laddie boy, Laddie boy
Whatever your name may be
There’s a look in your eye as you go marching by
Tells me you will dare and do and die
And when you hear those shells begin to sing
There’ll be someone somewhere who cares will murmur this prayer
May you win your share of glory
And come back to tell the story
Goodbye and good luck Laddie boy

Somewhere in France
There waits the chance
One fighting chance, that’s’ all
May you return to hearts that yearn
Or like a soldier fall
As in grandaddy’s day
Tho’ today no blue or gray
Clad in Khaki fine and fit
Marching on to do your bit

Chorus

Goodbye Broadway, Hello France

(U.S., 1917)

Words: C. Francis Reisner and Benny Davis
Music: Billy Baskette

This song gained fame as a showstopper in the Broadway review *The Passing Show of 1917* and later earned the reputation as one of the best marches of the war years. Like “Laddie Boy,” *Goodbye Broadway, Hello France* also demonstrates how bravado had supplanted isolationism in the American public mind. It is also an example of how
patriotic songs were used to instruct the public about war aims. This song mentions several: liberty, home, and “our debt to France.” The cover of this song depicts the transatlantic handshake of General John “Black Jack” Pershing with the French General Ferdinand Foch.

*Goodbye, New York town, goodbye, Miss Liberty*
Your lights of freedom will guide us across the sea
Ev'ry soldier’s sweetheart bidding goodbye
Ev'ry soldier’s mother drying her eye
Cheer up, we’ll soon be there
Singing this Yankee air:

**Chorus**

Goodbye, Broadway, hello France
We’re ten million strong
Goodbye, Broadway, hello France
It won’t take us long
Don’t you worry while we’re there
It’s for you we’re fighting, too
So goodbye, Broadway, hello France
We’re going to square our debt to you

“Vive Pershing!” is the cry across the sea
We’re united in this fight for liberty
France sent us a soldier, brave Lafayette
Whose deeds and fame we cannot forget
Now that we have the chance
We’ll pay our debt to France

**God Be with Our Boys Tonight**

(Britain., 1918)

Words: Frederick G. Bowles
Music: Wilfrid Sanderson

English poet Frederick Bowles’s song, as set to music by singer and opera director Wilfrid Sanderson, became an instant classic in the United States when it was recorded by Irish-American tenor John McCormack, one of history’s first great recording stars. Soon after its debut the American magazine *The Music Trades* pronounced that *God Be with*
Our Boys To-night "will undoubtedly go down in history as one of the most outstanding ballads of the world war."[4] By the middle of 1918, after a year of war, Americans had fallen into a far more sober mood than that expressed by Goodbye Broadway, Hello France! Besides McCormack’s famous performance, this piece succeeded in capturing the fear and uncertainty of the times while also sounding a note of consolation without the maudlin or trite sentimentality that ruined so many other compositions of this era.

Brave eyes that looked so tenderly
Where are you now today?
Sad was our heart at break of dawn
After you went away
Loud sang the lark o’er fields of gold
High in the heavens above
Winter alone within our hearts
Calling for you we love

Chorus

O waiting heart, I dare not tell
How dark and long the lane
Only I pray that God will bring
Our dear ones back again
Safe to a home of peace and light
Across the furthest sea
May God be with our boys tonight
Wherever they may be

Brave ones who answered your country’s call
How could we let you go
Out of the sunshine of our souls
Save that we love you so?
There is a place within our hearts
No one on earth may fill
Someday at last you’ll come back to us
Watching and longing still
The sobering effect of mounting casualties had, of course, affected Britain even earlier than the U.S. In 1915, as casualty lists lengthened with no end in sight, hope and cheer were harder to find. Welshman David Ivor Davies, using the pen-name “Novello,” composed a stirring melody to match his American friend, Lena Guilbert Ford’s heartfelt lyrics, producing an affecting piece to supplant Tipperary as the song of the war. In contrast to earlier patriotic marches, Keep the Home Fires Burning acknowledged that people’s “hearts are breaking” and presented the image and sound of hope in spite of broken hearts. It demonstrates better than any other the power of song to help people share their fears and sorrows and find strength in common suffering.

They were summoned from the hillside
They were called in from the glen
And the country found them ready
At the stirring call for men
Let no tears add to their hardships
As the soldiers pass along
And although your heart is breaking
Make it sing this cheery song

Chorus

Keep the Home Fires Burning
While your hearts are yearning
Though your lads are far away
They dream of home
There’s a silver lining
Through the dark clouds shining
Turn the dark cloud inside out
Till the boys come home

Overseas there came a pleading
"Help a nation in distress"
And we gave our glorious laddies
Honour bade us do no less
For no gallant son of Freedom
To a tyrant's yoke should bend
And a noble heart must answer
To the sacred call of "Friend"

Chorus

Intermission

Soldiers in the trenches faced the brutality of war head-on. Hopes and illusions were brutally shattered by poor food, mud, tedium, homesickness and abusive superior officers even before the machine guns, shellfire and gas. Singing was an important weapon of psychological survival, and the men learned to share and dispel their miseries with a mixture of bitter sarcasm and satiric laughter. Soldier songs reflected the rather profane language of the front and illustrate the ways in which the war inspired a freer and courser expression during and after the war years. In 1930 the British editors of an early collection of trench songs could not bring themselves to print the three most offensive obscenities, so left them blank on the page. Even so, the press eloquently defended the soldiers’ cursing, noting that “they chose obscene words whose sadism matched the sadism of war. Their very ugliness satisfied because war—hated consciously or unconsciously—was ugly.”[5]

Crude songs occasionally got soldiers in trouble. In one memorable case the British Commander–in-Chief, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, couldn’t quite believe his ears when one unit passed by in review. He spurred his horse to follow along making his way to the front a the soldiers marched along, heartily singing,

_Do your balls hang low?
Do they dangle to and fro?
Can you tie them in a knot?
Can you tie them in a bow?

As the commander rode by, each rank fell silent, leaving only the lieutenant-colonel singing a lusty solo as Haig approached. Noticing the sudden quiet behind him, the colonel turned to see his red-faced commander, who told him, “I like the tune, but the words are inexcusable.”[6] Though the Field Marshall would not, we can perhaps excuse the soldiers for deploying the weapon of obscenity to combat the insanity of the times.

Parody of Your King and Country Need You

(Britai)

from Tommy’s Tunes
Tommy’s Tunes was the first collection of soldiers’ songs to appear in Britain, appearing in 1917, while the war was still going on. The editor, Second Lieutenant F. T. Nettleingham of the Royal Flying Corps, cleaned up much of the language and left out dozens of popular, but unprintable lyrics, but even so, a sense mordant humor, lewd innuendo, and hard-nosed cynicism emerges from its pages. These are Nettleingham’s notes on this piece: “A typical parody on the recruiting songs, with which the soldiers—and slackers and everyone else—were soon fed up.”[7]

**Refrain**

*For we don’t want your loving, and we think you’re awfully slow*
*To see that we don’t want you, so, please, won't you go?*
*We don't like your sing-songs, and we loathe your refrain*
*So don’t you dare to sing it near us again*

*Now, we don’t want to hurry you, but it's time you ought to go*
*For your songs and your speeches, they bore us so*
*Your coaxings and pettings drive us nigh insane*
*Oh! We hate you, and'll boo you and hiss you if you sing it again*

**The Lousy Lance-Corporal (Digger’s Song)**

(Australia)

Traditional, based on Villikins and his Dina

Words and Music by John Barry

Among other things, The Lousy Lance-Corporal reminds how much soldier slang, such as "trench coat," "over the top," “crummy” or “lousy,” [8] entered common speech as a result of the war. This parody of a popular sentimental song by Australian troops lamented the disregard for the suffering of the common soldier and also the resentment of colonial troops against the presumptuous superiority of English officers. It tells the tale of an Australian “digger” on leave in London from the Western Front who receives a dressing down for his improper uniform.

*Now a lousy Lance-Corporal said, “Pardon me please*
*You've mud on your tunic and blood on your sleeve*
*If you don't wipe it off all the people will laugh.”*
*Said that lousy Lance-Corporal on headquarters staff*

The Digger just gave him a murderous glance

*He said, “I’ve just come from the shambles of France*
*Where whizzbangs are flying and comforts are few*
*And brave men are dying for bastards like you.”*
Dinky-die! Dinky-die!
Where brave men are dying for bastards like you

We’re bombed on the left and we’re bombed on the right
We’re shelled all the day and we’re shelled all the night
And if something don’t happen and that mighty soon
There’ll be nobody left in the fucking platoon!

Dinky-die! Dinky-die!
There’ll be nobody left in the fucking platoon

Now all of this came to the ears of Lord Gort
Who gave the whole matter a good deal of thought
He awarded the Digger V.C. and two bars
For giving that corporal a kick up the arse

Dinky-die! Dinky-die!
For giving that corporal a kick up the arse[9]

Mademoiselle from Armentieres

(Britain, Canada, U.S)

Traditional

This song was immensely popular with British, Canadian and American troops on the Western Front, partly because it has a bawdy tune with bawdy words, and partly because it could be used as a template for an infinite number of variations to serve the sarcastic purposes at hand. The original British song was a crude and obscene story of German troops taking advantage of French girls, and it later morphed into a more joke about desperate soldiers’ lust for women, no matter their looks. What follows is a somewhat less crude, American version that pokes fun at horny doughboys rescuing the ugly mademoiselle of Armentieres from celibacy.

Oh, Mademoiselle from Armentières
Parlez-vous
Oh, Mademoiselle from Armentières
Parlez-vous
Oh, Mademoiselle from Armentières
She hadn’t been kissed in forty years
Hinky dinky, parlez-vous
Oh, Mademoiselle from Armentières
Parlez-vous
Oh, Mademoiselle from Armentières
Parlez-vous
She never had had much chance for fun
Till the Yanks came over with lots of mon
Hinky dinky, parlez-vous

Oh, Mademoiselle from Armentière,
Parlez-vous
Oh, Mademoiselle from Armentières
Parlez-vous
She tried to vamp all the fighting Yanks
‘Cause she thought they all owned N.Y. banks
Hinky dinky, parlez-vous[10]

Far, Far from Ypres

(Britain/Canada)

Traditional (based on Sing Me to Sleep by Clifton Bingham and Edwin Green)

The sentimental words and schmaltzy tune of Sing Me to Sleep were the ideal vehicle for British and Canadian troops stationed near Ypres to laugh and cry about their misery and homesickness. The original was a soppy romantic lullaby:

Sing me to sleep the shadows fall
Let me forget the world and all
Tired is my heart, the day is long
Would it would come to evening song!

Sing me to sleep, your hand in mine
Our fingers as in prayer entwine
Only your voice, Love, let me hear
Singing to tell me you are near

This version of the soldiers’ parody was published in a Canadian trench newspaper early in the war. Writing home, one Canadian officer wrote that this song was very popular, and “it absolutely reflects the impression and feelings of the men, and officers as well, in my opinion.”[11]
Sing me to sleep where bullets fall
Let me forget the war and all
Damp is my dugout, cold are my feet
Nothing but bully and biscuits to eat

Sing me to sleep where bombs explode
And shrapnel shells are a-la-mode
Over the sandbags helmets you find
Corpses in front of you, corpses behind.

Far, far from Ypres I long to be
Where German snipers cannot pot me
Think of me crouching where the worms creep
Waiting for someone to sing me to sleep

Sing me to sleep in some old shed
The rats are running around in my head
Stretched out on my waterproof
Dodging the raindrops through the roof

Sing me to sleep where the camp fires glow
When nights are cold and spirits are low
Dreaming of home and days in the West
Somebody’s overseas boot on my chest

Fare from the star-shells I long to be
Lights of old London I’d rather see
Think of me crouching where the worms creep
Waiting for someone to sing me to sleep[12]

When You Come Back

(U.S. 1918)
Words and Music by George M. Cohan

No consideration of songs of the Great War is complete without George M. Cohan, the master American showman and composer of patriotic hits “You’re a Grand Old Flag” and “Over There.” Yet the optimist-in-chief was caught in a doubtful mood when in July 1918 he copyrighted a new song entitled, ”When You Come Back (If You Do Come Back) There’s a Whole World Waiting For You.”[13] Recognizing that his “if” was too depressing to be popular, he decided a
few weeks later to switch out “if you do come back” to “yes when you come back.” That very obstinate “yes” erected a wall of denial that only Americans, who had missed most of the war, were capable of at this late stage.

From Frisco Bay to old Broadway
Today all over the USA
We know we’re fighting the foe
So we all stand steady and ready to go
We know no fear, we know no tear
And all we hear is the Yankee cheer
I heard a girlie say
To her boyfriend as he marched away:

Chorus

“When you come back, yes when you come back
You’ll hear the Yankee cry, ‘Atta boy, Jack!’
And when you return, remember to bring
Some little thing that you get from the King
And drop me a line from Germany
Do, Yankee Doodle, do!
When you come back, and you will come back
There’s the whole world waiting for you!

It’s rum, rum, rum, the fife and drum
So march in time for the time has come
To smash right through with a bang
With the same old spirit when liberty rang!
To win, begin to rush right in
And fly our flag over old Berlin!
Let’s let our message be
To the Yankee across the sea:

Chorus
Have You News of My Boy Jack?

(Britain, 1917)

Words: Rudyard Kipling

Music: Edward German

Nobel Prize-winning poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling was the muse of British Imperialism. He was born in British India and educated in a military boarding school in Britain, after which he returned to India as a journalist. He believed in the civilizing mission of England and its empire and though never a soldier himself, wrote numerous stories celebrating the manliness of British soldiers and adventurers in India, Africa, and elsewhere. As soon as war with Germany was declared, he pulled strings with friends in the army to gain a commission for his sixteen-year-old son John, who had been rejected by recruiters on account of his poor eyesight. Kipling was eager to see his only son John become the soldier-hero he had never been and proudly watched him march to war in a division of Irish Guards. He was equally devastated when his son was reported missing and probably dead at age 18 after his very first battle, a British offensive in the Battle of Loos in September of 1915. Kipling clung to the hope that John was a prisoner of the Germans, but after several months without any news of his son, he was resigned to the fact that his son was likely dead. For the rest of his life Kipling was haunted by not knowing the circumstances of his son’s death and by the fact that his body was never recovered.[14] In these verses Kipling invokes the permanent anguish of loss and the sense of being overwhelmed by historic forces far beyond human control.

“Have you news of my boy Jack?”
Not this tide

“When d’you think that he’ll come back?”
Not with this wind blowing, and this tide

“Has anyone else had word of him?”
Not this tide
For what is sunk will hardly swim
Not with this wind blowing, and this tide

Oh dear, what comfort can I find?
Oh dear, what comfort, what comfort can I find?
None this tide
Nor any tide
Except he didn’t shame his kind
Not even with that wind blowing
And that tide.

Then hold your head up all the more
This tide
And ev’ry tide
Because he was the son, the son you bore
And gave to that wind blowing
Because he was the son you bore
And gave to that wind blowing
and gave, and gave to that wind blowing
And that tide.

The Boys Who Won’t Come Home

(US, 1918)
Words: Harry Hamilton
Music: Ed Thomas

Though George M. Cohan could not face it, someone had to sing of the agony of loss to an American audience. Harry Hamilton’s lyrics are a direct response to drum-banging triumphalism, presenting a mother who whispers her sorrow as bands playing upbeat Cohenesque tunes parade by in the background. Hamilton quotes Alfred Bryan’s reviled old hit, *I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier*, by having the mother say of his son that “he was my pride and joy; I loved him just as ev’ry other mother loves her boy.” The difference is that this new song uses the past tense; the son has died. And unlike Bryan’s anti-war refrain, Hamilton’s mother seeks comfort in the belief that her son’s death had a purpose.

The flags were waving gaily all along the village street
The air was filled with music and the sound of marching feet
The boys had come back home again, their fighting days were done
And ev’ry heart was filled with pride for the glory they had won
A gray-haired mother tried to smile amid the cheers and cries
She murmured softly as she gazed with sad and tear-dimmed eyes:

Chorus
“My boy was one of those who went away; he was my pride and joy
I loved him just as ev’ry other mother loves her boy
He gave his life to Uncle Sam; he’s sleeping o’er the foam
So while you’re cheering, don’t forget the boys who won’t come home

“He heard his country calling and he answered to the call
He went like all of Pershing’s men prepared to give his all
He took my blessing with him when he sailed across the sea
And since he went, I’ve prayed for him and waited patiently
But greater glory claimed him, and I’m proud that he could go
He’s sleeping now in Flander’s field where crimson poppies grow”

Chorus

Keep the Home Fires Burning (reprise)

They were summoned from the hillside
They were called in from the glen
And the country found them ready
At the stirring call for men
Let no tears add to their hardships
As the soldiers pass along
And although your heart is breaking
Make it sing this cheery song

Chorus

Keep the Home Fires Burning
While your hearts are yearning
Though your lads are far away
They dream of home
There’s a silver lining
Through the dark clouds shining
Turn the dark cloud inside out
Till the boys come home

Overseas there came a pleading
"Help a nation in distress"
And we gave our glorious laddies
Honour bade us do no less
For no gallant son of Freedom
To a tyrant’s yoke should bend
And a noble heart must answer
To the sacred call of “Friend”

Chorus

Notes


