

Folk Song: Scarborough Fair

“Scarborough Fair” is a traditional English ballad whose earliest known versions date to the late medieval and early Renaissance periods. It tells of a young man sending a list of impossible tasks—such as making a shirt without seams or washing it in a dry well—to a former lover as a condition for reconciliation. This structure of poetic riddles and “impossible tasks” is common in European folk songs of the time. The haunting, modal melody gives it a distinctly old-world sound, echoing the music heard in 16th-century England.

The song takes its name from Scarborough Fair, a famous trade fair held annually in the coastal town of Scarborough, Yorkshire. First granted a royal charter by King Henry III in 1253, the fair lasted an impressive 45 days each summer. By the Renaissance, it had become one of the largest and most cosmopolitan gatherings in England, attracting merchants, entertainers, and visitors from all over Europe. Stalls sold everything from fine cloth to spices, and the fair was renowned for its music, dancing, and storytelling.

Scarborough Fair Lyrics

Are you going to Scarborough Fair?
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.
Remember me to one who lived there.
She once was a true love of mine.

Have her make me a cambric shirt
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.
Without no seams, nor fine needle work.
Then she'll be a true love of mine.

Tell her to weave it in a sycamore wood lane.
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Gather it up in a basket of flowers
Then she'll be a true love of mine.

Have her wash it in yonder dry well
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Where water ne'er sprung, nor drop of rain fell.
Then she'll be a true love of mine.

Tell her to find me an acre of land.
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Between the sea foam and over the sand.
Then she'll be a true love of mine.

Plow the land with the horn of a lamb.
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Then sow some seeds from north of the dam.
Then she'll be a true love of mine.

Have her reap it with a sickle of leather.
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Gather it up in a bunch of heather.
Then she'll be a true love of mine.

If she tells me she can't, then I'll reply.
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Let me know, that at least she will try.
Then she'll be a true love of mine.

Love imposes impossible tasks
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Though not more than any heart asks.
And I must know she's true love of mine.

When thou has finished thy task.
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Come to me my hand for to ask.
For then you'll be a true love of mine.

Scarborough Fair

English Folk Song, Ballad

Traditional

9

9

p

Musical notation for measures 1-8 of Scarborough Fair. The score is in 3/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) features a melodic line with a long slur over measures 1-8. The left hand (bass clef) provides a simple accompaniment of quarter notes. A piano (*p*) dynamic marking is present at the beginning.

9

9

mf *mp* *p*

Musical notation for measures 9-16 of Scarborough Fair. The right hand continues the melodic line with a slur. The left hand accompaniment remains consistent. Dynamic markings include *mf* at the start, *mp* at measure 12, and *p* at the end of the system.

17

17

Musical notation for measures 17-24 of Scarborough Fair. The right hand continues the melodic line with a slur. The left hand accompaniment remains consistent.

25

25

Musical notation for measures 25-32 of Scarborough Fair. The right hand continues the melodic line with a slur. The left hand accompaniment remains consistent.

33

Musical notation for measures 33-37. The right hand features a melodic line with a long slur over measures 33-37. The left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

38

Musical notation for measures 38-42. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over measures 38-42. The left hand continues with eighth-note accompaniment.

43

Musical notation for measures 43-48. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over measures 43-48. The left hand continues with eighth-note accompaniment.

49

Musical notation for measures 49-54. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over measures 49-54. The left hand continues with eighth-note accompaniment. The instruction *p legato* is written in the right hand, and *con Ped.* is written below the left hand.

55

Musical notation for measures 55-60. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over measures 55-60. The left hand continues with eighth-note accompaniment. The instruction *mf* is written in the right hand.

61

Musical notation for measures 61-65. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over measures 61-65. The left hand continues with eighth-note accompaniment. The instruction *p* is written in the right hand.

67

Musical score for measures 67-72. The piece is in 7/8 time. Measure 67 features a bass line with eighth-note patterns and a treble line with a melodic line. A *rit.* (ritardando) marking is present above the treble staff. Measure 72 ends with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic marking and a fermata over the final note.

73

Musical score for measures 73-80. The piece continues in 7/8 time. The bass line features a steady eighth-note accompaniment, while the treble line has a more active melodic line with some rests. Measure 80 ends with a fermata.

81

Musical score for measures 81-87. The piece continues in 7/8 time. The bass line has a consistent eighth-note accompaniment, and the treble line features a melodic line with some rests. Measure 87 ends with a fermata.

Musical score for measures 88-94. The piece continues in 7/8 time. The bass line has a consistent eighth-note accompaniment, and the treble line features a melodic line with some rests. Measure 94 ends with a fermata.

11

Musical score for measures 95-101. The piece continues in 7/8 time. The bass line has a consistent eighth-note accompaniment, and the treble line features a melodic line with some rests. Measure 101 ends with a fermata.