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URBAN POPULAR SONG, THE BROADWAY MUSICAL, THE CABARET REVIVAL & THE BIRTH PANGS OF AMERICAN OPERA

STEPHEN SONDHEIM

Just as there is a deep division between classical and popular music in this country, there is also a division between popular music before and after the mid-fifties—before and after rock. Rock fans often reveal a lamentable ignorance about the traditions of the American popular song before the electric guitar. But in precisely the same way—prejudice that can be measured generationally—the older aficionados of pre-rock pop too frequently condemn rock as a plot against musical truth and beauty. There are marked differences between the two styles, insofar as something so diverse as the whole tradition of American popular music can be simply divided in two. But there are similarities, as well, and both sides are foolish to ignore them.

White American popular song before rock was based in spirit on folk models but in form on European art music. Simpler folk songs and their manifestations as country music and "race music" had some of their roots in the church, to be sure, and there were exceptions to the prevalent urbanity and gentility, most notably the ragtime craze of the first decade of this century. But by and large, even those popular composers who took note of native traditions were careful to domesticate them into the accepted ballad forms of the day, as Stephen Foster did with Negro spirituals. The process was precisely the same as that employed by "serious" composers,

such as Dvořák with his evocations of Czech folk melodies—or of spirituals.

In a time before records and the radio, songs were composed for the educated amateur or for theatrical revues, including the minstrel shows. Songs for the home tended to be sentimental, as did so much of the parlor music of the time; indeed, the ballad "After the Ball," with its massive sheet-music sales in 1892, is sometimes cited as the first real hit single in American history. Show tunes and dance-band marches and polkas could be livelier, and Broadway songs enjoyed the added advantage of the publicity attendant upon the show itself.

The American musical comedy—and hence the American popular song and, eventually, the Hollywood musical—that emerged at the turn of this century owed much to Central European operetta and to its English variant epitomized by Gilbert and Sullivan. This was, in essence, opera, but stripped of its high-art pretensions and defined by a tuneful humor and sweet sentimentality that placed it at least ostensibly in the realm of entertainment. The form's high point came between the wars, when such composers as Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin and Richard Rodgers achieved a blend of melody, wit and sensual sophistication that ensures the continued popularity of their work to this day. Formally, however, the musical comedy rarely transcended the revues that inspired it. The plots were formulaic, vehicles for the great singing and acting stars of the time, and the lyrics dealt in simple situations with simple, declarative tunes to match.

Well before World War II, however, there had been attempts to create a true American opera based on the Broadway musical. "Opera" in this sense did not mean something snobbish and highbrow. It meant an attempt by composers to express themselves as directly and originally as they could within this vital form of indigenous American musical theater. There was a clear precedent for making opera out of popular musical theater: Mozart himself had done something similar with the German vaudeville *Singspiel* in *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and *The Magic Flute*. American composers were further encouraged by the energy and seemingly inexorable internal evolution of the musical, combined with the

sterility of "serious" American opera—a sterility that had at least as many sociological explanations as strictly musical ones. Three composers should be mentioned here: Gershwin, with his *Porgy and Bess,* which has been acclaimed as the greatest American opera; Kurt Weill, a European expatriate who adopted the form of the musical and composed some superior examples before writing, in *Street Scene,* another "great American opera"; and, finally, Leonard Bernstein, who composed a fine musical with *West Side Story* and something more ambitious with *Candide,* and who has not yet given up his goal to provide us an American opera that is both popular and respected. All three men refused to rest content with the simpler forms they were expected to fill. And Weill and Bernstein were explicit in their intention to make the leap from musicals to opera.

American opera up until the 1930's was a primitive thing. If American intellectuals were crippled by an undue deference to Europe, American high society was positively transfixed by its European betters. The American preference for European musicians continues to this day, as a quick count of American-born music directors of leading American symphony orchestras will reveal. In Europe, opera was originally a princely entertainment made graciously available to the lower classes—apart from a few exceptions in Britain and Germany, in which the popular dispensation came from a civic-minded upper bourgeoisie. When opera was nationalized in Central Europe after World War I, the precedent for a democratic opera, already established, was institutionalized by the new republican states. Government subsidies kept ticket prices within reach of the average person, and an innovative tradition prevented the repertory from becoming fixed on a few warhorses. American opera was the province of nouveaux riches who aspired to European class and glamour: before the advent of film and recording stars, an opera singer was as exotic a creature as the arts could provide. For a while, American opera houses emulated Europe in competing for new operas. But when new music began to sound unpleasant, the need for novelties was easily assuaged by exciting new singers and flashy new productions.

In all of this, the American composer was a decided after-

thought. The annals of the Metropolitan Opera—which for a long time was America's only opera house offering even close to a full season—do reveal the periodic American-opera premiere. Such works as Deems Taylor's *The King's Henchman* or Louis Gruenberg's *The Emperor Jones* were earnest, unoriginal settings of librettos with American themes, forgotten as soon as they were premiered. Later, there was a whole school of folk opera, epitomized by Douglas Moore and Jack Beeson. Too often these works sound dated and selfconscious, and the cynical anachronisms of Gian Carlo Menotti and Thomas Pasatieri sound even worse. There were a few exceptions to this gloomy picture, but nearly all of them—including *Porgy and Bess*—grew out of alternate means of patronage than the conventional opera company. Most striking were Virgil Thomson's two operas to texts by Gertrude Stein. *Four Saints in Three Acts* enjoyed an enormous chic success in 1934, the American equivalent of Berlin's *Threepenny Opera*. But neither it nor the even finer *The Mother of Us All* of 1947 has yet been performed at the Metropolitan.

The avant-garde music-theater events of the past two decades are even further removed from the conventional operagoer's taste, which by now seems fully satisfied by singing and the more primitive forms of melodramatic acting. Yet works like Glass's *Satyagraha* have emerged from that tradition and will eventually enter the operatic repertory, and more and more seemingly marginal experimental composers are showing signs of turning to the operatic stage—and are being encouraged to do so by such far-sighted operatic music directors as Dennis Russell Davies (who, symptomatically, is based in Stuttgart, not America).

Gershwin's *Porgy* dates from 1935, Weill's *Street Scene* from 1947 and Bernstein's *Candide* from 1956. We have not been deluged with serious musicals since, or with vital new American operas by composers who emerged from that tradition. In fact, the musical itself is in trouble, with revivals (*The Pirates of Penzance*, no less) ruling Broadway along with recyclings like *42nd Street*. Broadway has profound esthetic and sociological problems of its own. If the audience for American opera is conservative, so is that for the musical comedy—a middle-class public in search of escapist enter-

tainment. The financing of any Broadway show, and especially a musical, has grown so perilous as to discourage artistic innovation. And Broadway's rules, or habits, hardly help, demanding as they do eight shows a week and thus dissuading gifted singers from voice-threatening strain.

It is this context in which the success of Stephen Sondheim must be considered. Sondheim was born in 1930 into a well-to-do New York family. A precocious child, he showed youthful musical talent and studied piano for a couple of years. But when he was ten, his parents divorced and Sondheim spent time at a military academy—which he enjoyed—before moving with his mother to a farm in Pennsylvania. Their next-door neighbor was an old family friend who became a second father to Sondheim—Oscar Hammerstein II, the lyricist who collaborated first with Vincent Youmans, Rudolf Friml, Jerome Kern and Sigmund Romberg and later with Richard Rodgers. Sondheim credits Hammerstein not only with inspiring his first efforts as a lyricist and composer, but with the firm and detailed criticism that enabled him to perfect his craft. At Williams College, Sondheim first thought of majoring in mathematics, but eventually gravitated to the music department, where he received a firm technical basis. He was so successful that he won a two-year scholarship upon graduation for further study at Princeton with Milton Babbitt.

Even in the early fifties, Babbitt was a radical avant-gardist, and had completed the early formulations of his total-serialist theory. But he was also a lover of musicials and had spent time writing them and popular songs in that idiom. Sondheim's apprenticeship with Babbitt suggests that he had a talent for "serious" music, and that his preference for the musical was his way of side-stepping the dilemmas posed by musical modernism. "Steve was terribly bright, ambitious, and could have been good as any sort of composer," Babbitt later recalled. "But there was no question that Broadway was where he wanted to be."

Although he had been trained as a composer, it was as a lyricist that Sondheim was first type-cast in New York. He had a part-time scriptwriting job on the *Topper* television show and left that to write songs for an aborted musical revue. His first Broadway credit

was as lyricist for Bernstein's *West Side Story*, and after that he provided the words for *Gypsy*. His first success as both lyricist and composer came with *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in 1962. That was followed by the short-lived (nine performances but prized by its cult) *Anyone Can Whistle* of 1964 and a return to the role of lyricist for Rodgers's *Do I Hear a Waltz?* in 1965.

Sondheim's verbal felicity has remained with him throughout his career. He has that gift for clever rhymes that has distinguished lyricists since W. S. Gilbert ("beauty celestial the best you'll / agree" from *Follies*, for instance). Better still, he has the ability to link musical construction with verbal cadence, to let the rhythm of the words shape the structure of a phrase. To take yet another of many possible examples, the song "Broadway Baby," again from *Follies*, includes a stanza that begins "At / my tiny flat . . ." This is an unexpected rhyme, to start with. And it helps define the melodic structure of the song itself.

That sense of melody, shape and overall formal design only really came into its own after 1970, with *Company* (*Forum*, for all its cleverness and charm, was not much more than a revue). *Company* was Sondheim's first real collaboration with Harold Prince, the producer-director, and it marked the beginning of a creative relationship that has defined his career since. Prince had co-produced *West Side Story* and produced *Forum*, but from *Company* on he and Sondheim worked together as closely as lyricists and composers had traditionally done on Broadway. Indeed, their complementary attributes—Prince the knowing showman, Sondheim the introverted, selfconscious artist—make for a synergy that recalls the working dynamics between Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. "The reason I like to work with Hal Prince is that we have the same point of view, but we're abrasive," Sondheim once said. "We see the large and small parts exactly the same, but it's the middle ground where we disagree violently, and it causes a lot of good work to be done. I love to write in dark colors about gut feelings. Hal has a sense of audience that I often lack."

Company formed a trilogy with *Follies* (1971) and *A Little Night*

Music (1973), mirroring and exalting a certain early-seventies sensibility. The basic Broadway audience was and is a conservative one. But New York has a brittle, more sophisticated side, too, shared by the people who create and perform the productions. The Prince-Sondheim shows, with their alternating, overlapping irony and sentimentality, effected a marriage between what has been called the suburban "bridge-and-tunnel crowd" and the witty, nostalgic, sometimes homosexual element of contemporary New York. The lyrics and the dramatic situations were close enough to most people's lives to seem comforting. But they were also peppered with a sophistication and even a kinkiness that could titillate. These shows were celebrations of marriage and love, yet their seeming normalcy was undercut and contrasted with wit and camp (especially in *Follies,* with its parade of veteran female performers). The Sondheim-Prince shows avoided cliché, as so many Broadway productions these days fail to do. They evoked nostalgia without being fettered by the past. And they each had their conceptually bold sides, as well. *Company,* a celebration of marriage, was riven with acerbic asides about modern mores. *Follies,* a tale of two marriages set at a reunion of Ziegfeld-type showgirls, offered a feast for Broadway nostalgists in a clever, contemporarily complex package. And *A Little Night Music,* which took a Mozart title for an adaptation of Ingmar Bergman's Mozartean film comedy, *Smiles of a Summer Night,* was a waltz-musical that conveyed much of what Ravel attempted in *La Valse,* without the Old World ennui.

Sondheim's melodies are shaped differently from those of Broadway's past in part because his way of working is different. What makes his best songs so fine is their synchronism of words and music, the music supporting the text and the text defining the music, with both the sense and the sound of the words playing their parts. "Send in the Clowns" from *A Little Night Music* is Sondheim's best-known song. It lacks his characteristic wit and naughty patter, but otherwise it can stand as representative of his method. The song emerges from the four-note phrase announced at the very beginning by the clarinet. That fragment is repeated and varied (the title phrase itself is one of those variants) in a

broken, musing fashion; the entire song is built up of these four-note fragments and their extensions. That hesitation reflects perfectly the dramatic state of the protagonist. The lyrics are full of a sweet suggestiveness, intimations of acrobats soaring and falling as a metaphor for love, and the allusion to clowns evokes both lovers and love itself. This is not a tune in the more traditional sense—several successive melodic ideas, neat and hummable. But it may be more true to the needs of the drama, and a more deftly artful piece of musical composition, than some of those older tunes, as well.

Sondheim's sensitivity to the marriage of words and music, and his ability to reflect the realities of his own time, can also be heard in his wittier, wickeder songs. "Poor Baby" from *Company*, for instance, is a study in cattiness, a sequence of women casting doubt on a male friend's current companion—a litany of bitchiness that builds into a complex ensemble texture. Sondheim's songs often build that way, from simple (or not so simple) melody and accompaniment to complicated set pieces. His musical idiom, especially in this trilogy from the early seventies, is happily historical, invoking styles and procedures from every corner of the American popular song repertory. And not just popular song, but opera, too. In that context, his most ingenious musical structures may not seem all that innovative; since Mozart's time, opera has offered ensembles of a richer complexity. But the proper standard of comparison is not opera but Broadway. And in any case, Sondheim invests his seeming conservatism with musical touches of his own, and enlivens his music with the contemporary spirit of his lyrics. Besides, in a time in which composers like George Rochberg are elevating the past into an esthetic for the present, Sondheim's eclecticism seems positively fashionable.

Company and *A Little Night Music* were hits; *Follies*, although it ran for a year, lost its entire investment. *Pacific Overtures* of 1976 and *Sweeney Todd* of 1979 were conceptually bolder but only marginally successful at the box office, while *Merrily We Roll Along*, full of fine, cleverly interlocking songs but crippled by its awkward book, closed precipitously. *Pacific Overtures* is about yet another kind of marriage—an audacious attempt to recount the story of

Japan's Westernization through a mixture of Western musical comedy and Kabuki drama. The resultant fresco was hard for audiences to identify with—all that foreignness in the musical and dramatic idioms, the lack of a single romantic hero or heroine, the distance from contemporary life. Yet some of the music was quite remarkable in its marriage of Japanese and Western sounds and effects. And the lyrics were as charming as ever ("If the tea the Shogun drank will / Serve to keep the Shogun tranquil").

Sweeney Todd, the tale of the "demon barber of Fleet Street" who allies himself with a maker of meat pies as a way of disposing of his victims, is the most operatically ambitious Sondheim-Prince collaboration yet. So grandiose are its ambitions, in fact, that controversy has arisen as to whether it actually is an opera. Beverly Sills wants to stage it at the New York City Opera—in the regular season, not in her summer operetta season. It belongs in the regular season; it is certainly as "serious" as, say, *Cavalleria Rusticana. Sweeney Todd*'s operatic aspirations lurk everywhere in the score. The story itself is a wonderful one, mixing Dickensian atmosphere, Grand Guignol humor, lyricism and terror in a way that seems perfectly suited to its creators' sensibilities. The two principal figures are superb dramatic creations, and superb vehicles for stars as persuasive as Len Cariou and Angela Lansbury. They can, as with most of Sondheim's leads, be portrayed by either singing actors or acting singers. But some of the vocal writing for the other roles is operatically overt, as in the high trill for the soprano ingenue. And the score's formal construction is Sondheim's most organically far-reaching to date. The idioms range from baroque-style evocations of the street cries of London to Weill and Stravinsky, full of dissonance and bitonality. With its mosaic construction, rapidly shifting moods, recurrent leitmotifs and complex ensembles, *Sweeney Todd* belongs on the operatic stage far more deservedly than most of the new operas that jostle for position there.

Sondheim has not attained his status as America's finest living composer of musicals without doubts being voiced. Classical critics fault him for not doing his own orchestrations. Others complain of his supposed inability—a reflection of his own guarded personality, Leonard Bernstein has suggested—to express simple, direct, intense

emotion, and of his tuneless tunes. They have accused him and Prince of mixing up genres that should be kept separate, and of being more devoted to campy exploitation than genuine emotion.

Broadway composers have traditionally farmed out their orchestrations; even Bernstein has done it. Sondheim attributes his delegation of the task to a "lack of time and skill." It seems indeed unfortunate when a composer abdicates that part of his work, however: orchestration is not just fancy dress but part of a composer's very expression, and not to bother with it is to depersonalize that expression. But such a division of responsibilities may be just another example of the new kinds of collaboration practiced not only by Sondheim and Prince but by Robert Ashley and Laurie Anderson, as well—a different assignment of the creative tasks, and one not to be scorned if it happens to work. Sondheim's regular orchestrator is Jonathan Tunick, who has collaborated with him since *Company*. Tunick is clearly attuned to Sondheim's method and style, and by this point must be credited along with him for the originality that results. "Steve is very exact in his intentions," Tunick has said. "He doesn't concern himself with instrumentation at all, but he gives me a very thorough piano score that contains every detail of harmony and rhythm, as well as melody."

Orchestration is a superficial matter next to the innate distaste some critics feel for Sondheim and the entire world they believe him to epitomize. Arlene Croce, reviewing the *Follies* cast album—which, incidentally, curtails some songs and eliminates others to compress the show onto a single disc—suggested that the rhyme of "celestial" and "best / you'll" implies the old women are "bestial," and called "the dowdy spectacle of their exhibition not only ironic and sad but actively disgusting." Even Sondheim's champions must admit to a disturbing undercurrent in his work, without necessarily sharing Croce's lurid vehemence. There is a sometimes cynically vulgar, manipulative side to Broadway, and it has infected the conception and execution of Sondheim's work—mostly, one suspects, through what he likes to think of as "Hal's sense of audience."

Many of the more moderate complaints against Sondheim seem to be about "flaws" perceived by his admirers as virtues. As a man of today, Sondheim refuses to accept the pat, sweet directness that

once defined our national character, at least as that character was projected in musicals and musical films. Although he echoes elegant interwar artifice, he is inevitably different from the great masters of the American popular song—more fragmented emotionally and musically, drier, more ironic, more ambivalent. And he would only deny himself were he to attempt to be anything different than he is. Sondheim was once quoted as saying, "At least half my songs deal with ambivalence, feeling two things at once. I like neurotic people. I like troubled people. Not that I don't like squared-away people, but I *prefer* neurotic people." On the other hand, his songs are not all *that* tuneless. And what they lack in directness, they gain in subtlety and complexity. If his work approaches opera, that hardly means other composers cannot write old-fashioned, simple-minded musicals. Indeed they do, season after season. Sondheim's major contribution may even be a conservative one, sustaining the conventions and the intellectual respectability of the old-fashioned Broadway musical. Perhaps the creative moment for formulaic simplicity has passed, at least if it is to be achieved with genius.

Or perhaps not. The obvious source for the renewal of the traditional musical lies in rock. The two worlds, once so seemingly antithetical, have already begun to merge. Performers like Linda Ronstadt and Rex Smith have made acclaimed Broadway debuts, and composers like James Taylor, Paul Simon and Melanie have shown interest in the form. Rock is distinguished from the curdled manifestations of latter-day Tin Pan Alley and Broadway by its directness of expression. That openness recalls the earlier days of Broadway itself, so it is at least possible that, should rock composers be lured to Broadway, they could revitalize American musical theater. But rebirth is hardly guaranteed. The relative freedom that rock composers enjoy in the studio cannot be matched on the stage, given Broadway's collaborative esthetic and perilous financial insecurity. And the most likely candidates for such a cross-over—singer-songwriters such as Simon, Taylor and Randy Newman—are hardly simple and straightforward, themselves.

Sondheim stands for a different sensibility, which was responsible for the revival of cabaret life in New York in the early seventies. The composers and performers who led this revival were part of

the same spirit that infused Broadway and blended so compatibly with suburban conservatism. Like Sondheim, they sought a more overtly dramatic expression through music. Their concerns were partly nostalgic, to bring back singers and styles that had been obliterated by rock. The cabaret revival was fueled by the growth and increasing self-assertion of New York's homosexual subculture, and it paralleled the commercial decline of Broadway. With the revitalization of theater attendance in the late seventies, and with the rise of disco, New York's cabarets lost some of their frenetic trendiness. The energies that came together in the cabaret revival have by now dispersed. Barry Manilow energized and vulgarized middle-of-the-road pop. Bette Midler is trying to establish a place for herself in films. Some performers have ventured into disco and dance-rock, and others are still to be seen in actual cabarets.

Sondheim, whose "Send in the Clowns" has probably been massacred in more different ways in more different cabarets than any other single song, was never a direct part of this movement; he merely shared its sensibility. Neurotic as ever, he is a slow worker who must always struggle to justify his place in the still undeniably commercial world of the Broadway theater. In a way, one wishes he had allowed the abstractly artistic aspect of Babbitt's influence to push him toward opera from the outset. But not really. What lends Sondheim's work its fascination is its very tension between art and entertainment, a tension mirrored in his creative relationship with Prince. He may be torn, and his conflicts may inhibit his art. But the very essence of his art *is* conflict, so that to wish away the tension would be to wish away the art.