

Stephen Sondheim. *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954–1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Whines and Anecdotes*
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Stephen Sondheim. *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981–2011) with Attendant Comments, Amplifications, Dogmas, Harangues, Digressions Anecdotes and Miscellany*
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Reviewed by Peter Hurley

It is dangerous to let the public behind the scenes. They are easily disillusioned and then they are angry with you, for it was the illusion they loved: they do not understand that what interests you is the way in which you have created the illusion.

W. Somerset Maugham (*The Summing Up*)

In 2010 and 2011, Stephen Sondheim published a two-volume collection of the lyrics of his Broadway musicals across the almost five-decade span of his professional career. As indicated by the lengthy subtitles, the lyrics are heavily annotated and accompanied by working notes and a detailed discussion of the history of each item, its performance and criticism, and reflections

on the ways that the many and varied disciplines and pressures of musical theatre shaped the songs. The first volume, which covers the first twenty-seven years of Sondheim's career, is titled *Finishing the Hat. Look, I Made a Hat*, the second, more miscellaneous volume, contains the lyrics from the later musicals, some earlier unpublished work, witty parodies not intended for broader publication and pieces composed for diverse genres, including film, television and even public and private events. The titles refer to 'Finishing the Hat,' a song from Sondheim's musical *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), which details the obsessive, painstaking and repetitive work that the artist must put in to completing a piece. It is the meticulous work of honing a perfectly crafted lyric that is the subject of these volumes.

In the preface to the first volume, Sondheim hopes that his books will be of interest to the general reader or dilettante. Even though he has no interest in cooking, he explains, he enjoys reading recipes, delighting in learning about another discipline that has parallels to his own. He hopes that anyone interested in the English language might take a similar delight in his discussion of the process of song writing (vol. 1, xxi):

I think the explication of any craft, when articulated by an experienced practitioner, can be not only intriguing but also valuable, no matter what particularity the reader may be attracted to.

Both volumes include photographs, but although there are reproductions of manuscript scores there are no musical examples.¹ Despite this generalist focus, these books are also of immense value to those with a specialist interest in the craft of writing song lyrics, and are unprecedented in their scope. Ira Gershwin's 1959 *Lyrics on Several Occasions* is a considerably less ambitious work,² and there is no other published source that offers such a depth and volume of information. But their value also lies in the fact that Sondheim is so remarkably articulate about both his work and the work of prior composers from which he draws inspiration, and engages with the craft of writing song lyrics with such precision and perceptiveness.

Sondheim is at pains to point out the differences between writing a song lyric and writing poetry and setting it to music, and goes to some length to define that which distinguishes poetry from lyrics. I was reminded of Ned Rorem declining to work with a poet who wanted his work set to music, stating that the words 'already have enough music in them.' Sondheim states (vol. 1, xix) that 'Poets tend to be poor lyricists because their verse has it's own inner music and doesn't make allowance for the real thing'.

In Sondheim's case the music is so much the servant of the text that only rarely are his melodies themselves used in other contexts without their lyrics. In stark contrast with many

¹ More academic works, complete with musical examples include Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002); Steve Swayne, *How Sondheim Found his Sound* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); and Mark Eden Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010). Perhaps the most potent illustrations of Sondheim musical examples can be found in the DVDs of the 2004 Michael Kantor PBS documentary *Broadway—the American Musical*, where the Extras sections are rich with footage of Sondheim sitting at the piano, playing and describing the relationship between his musical choices—both melodic and atmospheric—and the texts.

² Ira Gershwin, *Lyrics on Several Occasions: A Selection of Stage & Screen Lyrics Written for Sundry Situations, and now Arranged in Arbitrary Categories, to which have been added Many Informative Annotations & Disquisitions on their why & wherefore, their whom-for, their how, and Matters Associative* (New York: Knopf, 1959).

other composers, including Sondheim's mentor Oscar Hammerstein and the Gershwins, Sondheim declares that his music is generated by the text of the lyric, and that the melody comes to him simultaneously with the lyric. There is no fitting a lyric to a melody later: the melodic and rhythmic shapes are inherent in the lyric itself.³

An example of this close relationship between the shape of the music and lyrics is found in *Into the Woods*, where Rapunzel's mother (the witch) sings 'What did I clearly say—children must listen!' The melodic shape—its intervals and rhythm—is a pure amplification of the text, and even seems to transcend regional speech accents or inflection. Yet this melody also becomes the basis for leitmotivic treatment at key moments in the plot.

In his introductory chapters, Sondheim also discusses in some detail why imperfect rhymes are something he avoids. These of course have a lengthy history, for example in W.B. Yeats' famous 'bodies–ladies' pairing ('Lines Written in Dejection,' 1919), and Emily Dickinson's 'soul–all' rhyme ('Hope is the Thing with Feathers,' 1891). Nevertheless, he argues (vol. 1, xxvii):

All rhymes, even the farthest afield of the near ones (*home/dope*) draw attention to the rhymed word; if you don't want it to be spotlighted, you'd better not rhyme it. A perfect rhyme snaps the word, and with it the thought vigorously into place, rendering it easily intelligible. A near rhyme blurs it. A word like 'together' leads the ear to expect a rhyme like 'weather' or 'feather.' When the ear hears 'forever,' it has to pause a split second to bring the word into focus. Like a note that's a bit off pitch, a false rhyme doesn't destroy the meaning, but weakens it.

So some of our sonic experiences teach us to listen carefully, some teach us to listen less. This belief that a meticulous approach to word-setting can stimulate sensitivity to text gladdened my heart.

Yet *Finishing the Hat* and *Look, I Made a Hat* have been the subject of a great deal of negative criticism in both the daily press and in specialised music theatre journals. The *Guardian* (London), the *New York Times* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, for example, each published several reviews, which in turn generated a storm of negative online comment. While the professional reviews are largely positive, the reviewers all highlight the harshness with which they believe Sondheim criticised the work of other composers. Emma Brockes, for example, wrote on the *Guardian* blog that Sondheim is 'letting a bunch of people have it with the smile of the casual assassin' and that he 'wilfully misses the point.'⁴ Even Simon Callow, in a beautifully written, insightful and respectful review in the *Guardian*, expresses surprise at Sondheim's 'rebarbative' comments on the work of some of the 'deities of lyric writing,' quoting him on Allan Jay Lerner ('a chameleon of one colour'), Lorenz Hart ('sloppy'), Ira Gershwin ('showed off shamelessly because he knew that he was merely talented, whereas his brother was a genius'), and even Hammerstein, 'whose much-loved lyric for the great Jerome Kern number "All the Things You Are" is thrashed to within an inch of its life.'⁵

³ He described this process in an interview with Jonathan Biggins at the Theatre Royal in Sydney on 6 July 2007, broadcast as 'An Audience with Stephen Sondheim' screened on 5 August 2007 on the ABC TV *Sunday Arts* program.

⁴ Emma Brockes, 'Stephen Sondheim is Wrong about Noël Coward,' *Guardian Theatre Blog* <www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2010/nov/25/stephen-sondheim-memoir-noel-coward>. See also the responses to Brockes' article on the same page.

⁵ Simon Callow, 'Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim,' *Guardian*: 29 Oct. 2010.

It is unfortunate that Sondheim's conciseness as a lyricist contributes to the ease with which a pithy word can be taken out of context. But I believe that in focussing on Sondheim's negative assessments of other composers, these writers have missed the essential relationship between this kind of critique and the creative act, which has allowed Sondheim to advance both his own work and the form itself.

The kind of fine analysis that Sondheim undertakes in these volumes is a product of his early training. He has frequently stated that Oscar Hammerstein, a close family friend who mentored the teenaged Sondheim, encouraged him to 'pull apart a work you admire—see if you can work out what makes it good. Take a work you think is flawed—see if you can improve it a little.'⁶

Later, Sondheim studied with Milton Babbitt (among Sondheim's sketches for shows there is the occasional item that looks like a tone row). Babbitt also encouraged Sondheim to engage in careful analysis of a surprisingly wide range of musical styles; Sondheim recalls (vol. 1, 303) that Babbitt was

an admirer of Kern and Arlen as much as Mozart and Schoenberg. The first hour of each of our weekly sessions would be devoted to analyzing a song like 'All the Things You Are' [by Jerome Kern, with lyrics by Hammerstein], the next three to the Jupiter Symphony, always concentrating on the tautness of the structures, the leanness and frugality of the ideas.

Sondheim evidently took this advice to heart: these two volumes outline an endless process of refinement of technique through continuous criticism and honing of his material. As he himself explained (vol. 1, 37): 'If this seems like heavy duty nit-picking, it's a result of Oscar's teaching me to examine every word in a lyric with fierce care, because there are so few of them in a song.'

And Sondheim's analysis is not unrelentingly negative. In the first volume (p. 37), he praises the

colloquial ease of Berlin, the sophistication of Porter, the humour of Hart and Gershwin, the inventiveness of Harburg or the grace of Fields ... at their best [the lyrics of Hammerstein].. are more than heartfelt and passionate, they are monumental.

He identifies both the strengths and weaknesses of the composers and lyricists he discusses—sometimes within the same song—and his criticisms show great insight, and need to be read completely in context. His goal is neither to condemn the works he discusses nor to praise them, but simply to describe them in language that will ensure the continual questioning that is the stimulus to the creative process. What we are seeing is his engagement with the music theatre canon. As I read the *Finishing the Hat*, time and again I thought 'I know that song—why didn't I notice that before?', and almost never did I find myself disagreeing with Sondheim's insights.

Sondheim has been particularly criticised for his treatment of Noël Coward,⁷ whom he describes as 'the Master of Blather' (vol. 1, 229). His discussion of Coward is certainly acerbic,

⁶ The most complete discussion of Hammerstein's instruction that I know of is in an interview with Sondheim in Kantor's PBS documentary, *Broadway*.

⁷ See, in particular, Brookes, 'Sondheim is Wrong about Noël Coward.'

but it led me to see similarities between Coward and Sondheim that are, perhaps, stronger than he would like to admit. Every item of Coward's writing that Sondheim discusses, I have enjoyed, and every one of them made me think of a parallel example in Sondheim's own writing that I have also enjoyed.

Sondheim's dismissal of much pre-romantic music as 'surface sparkle and restrained lyricism,' for example, reminded me of the young Coward giggling at a Mozart opera, which he found to be precious, 'like piddling through flannel' (although this was an opinion he later regretted). His description of Coward's 'snickering observations about physical anomalies and sexual preferences' made me think of his own 'The Boy From ...,' a tale in which a puzzled girl sings about falling in love with the wrong kind of boy. Of course Sondheim's 'The Madame's Song' ('I never do anything twice') takes depiction of sexual preferences to an extreme beyond any of Coward's observations in song.

Sondheim calls 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen' a single joke repeated over and over, which reminded me of his own 'I'm Not Getting Married,' a stream-of-consciousness song of a neurotic, reluctant bride, arguing herself round and round, ending each section with the same phrase. This too is a single joke, endlessly repeated, but the resulting tension is marvellously effective. He declares that while both Coward and Cole Porter skewered the 'upper set,' Porter did it with 'fondness' and Coward with 'disdain.' There is, however, little fondness in Sondheim's 'The Ladies who Lunch,' a song in which an alcoholic Manhattanite condemns those around her. It is this devastating bitterness, however, that is the source of the song's strength.

Sondheim therefore appears to detest in Coward what is actually part of himself. I suspect that he is, at some level, aware of this, and that this awareness may have fuelled the bitterness of his criticism. He is, however, also anxious to transcend what he sees as Coward's limitations, which were, of course, a product of the time and place for which they are written. Sondheim has engaged with some of the most perennial and humorous of Coward's work, identified their essence in what appears a deprecating way, and then continued the development through his more contemporary settings of these situations.

I believe, however, that Sondheim doesn't actually detest Coward or any of the other composers he criticises. His appreciation of both the strengths and limitations of the composers and lyricists who have influenced him is a way of comprehending the human characteristics that shape his art. The language of his criticism is the language of description, and it shows how the creative process is stimulated by critical engagement with existing repertoire, his own included. For Sondheim is as hard on himself as he is on others. He condemns his own lyrics for *Westside Story* (vol. 1, 37), for example, for

a kind of overall wetness to the lyric, a wetness, I regret to say which persists throughout all of the romantic lyrics in the show, but which appealed to my collaborators and which may very well have contributed to the score's popularity.

(Incidentally, Sondheim reports that the Hammersteins particularly liked the lyric for *Maria*, highlighting both the inherently subjective nature of evaluation—even in a teacher–pupil relationship—and the sophistication of Sondheim's evaluative processes.)

Sondheim the man is critical of Sondheim the artist as a way of comprehending him. As a result, he has become more at home with the human flaws, more willing to accept the weaknesses that express humanity at the core of his art. Sondheim's earlier work was widely

described as excessively cerebral, his later work as being much more deeply emotional. We have seen his progress on the stage, and now through these books we are witness to the thoughts and processes of Sondheim's growth as a dramatist. Both Sondheim and Coward are in a line of outsiders observing human frailties in comedy and tragedy.

I believe that the critical storm generated by these books illustrates the gap between the ways that the practitioner and observer understand of the creative process. In these volumes Sondheim outlines the process by which he has developed his own talent, which is dependent on developing sensitivities and learning to live with all the conflicts and the challenges that result. His appreciation of both the strengths and limitations of the composers and lyricists who have influenced him is a way of comprehending the human characteristics that shape his art. His meticulous attention to the details of his craft has, however, 'let the public behind the scenes,' to return to our opening quote from Maugham, and revealed the hard work involved in creating the illusion of musical theatre. And in the process, he has indeed incurred the wrath of those who resent their disillusionment.

These are not books to be greedily devoured in a weekend marathon. I found it best to read a little, think about it, and then listen to some recordings. There's far too much depth for reading without reflection. Mary Rogers once said that her father, Richard Rogers, a Julliard graduate, 'was enough of a theoretician to explain musically anything he did—but he couldn't tell you *why* he made choices.' Sondheim is one of the few who really can, and he does so in this book, if we take the time to really engage. To study Sondheim's creative processes through these volumes (perhaps with a printed score close by) is as close to an apprenticeship in song writing with the master as most students could wish. If these books show that he is startlingly full of contradictions, then we should thank Sondheim for the honesty to reveal so much about our driving forces.