

“It Started Out Like a Song”: A Contextualized Musical Analysis of Stephen Sondheim’s Most Pivotal Works of the 1980s

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Abstract

Sondheim is often praised as one of the most prolific and exceptional musical theater composers of the 20th Century. In 1981, Stephen Sondheim experienced the biggest failure of his career with his passion project, Merrily We Roll Along. A few years following, he emerged back on the scene with a new writing partner James Lapine to write Sunday in the Park with George. This was a pivotal shift in Sondheim’s career, so these two musicals could give lots of insight into Sondheim’s musical development. This project will investigate these two works as equals and reveal Sondheim’s musical and thematic elements within them. I am using musical analysis methodology to allow the music to speak for itself and reveal the connections between the two larger works. Stephen Sondheim is a very unique composer, so a musical analysis has to be performed through many different lenses. Despite these two musicals being written in two different compositional styles, the way that Sondheim is able to convey emotion stays consistent. His use of pedal point, bimodality, effect chords, and voice leading all seem to attempt to convey the emotion of that specific moment. Learning how and why brilliant composers create their work is a key element in the creation of new and exciting art. This project provides musicians, composers, and educators with a prime example of how an artist is able to express his art freely and effectively.

Many scholars have set out to interpret and analyze the works of Stephen Sondheim. However, there is a lack of research on perhaps the most significant time in Sondheim’s life: the early 1980s. The contrasting nature of *Merrily We Roll Along* and *Sunday in the Park with George* is rarely mentioned and has never been focused on in scholarly discourse.

As a mentee and friend of Oscar Hammerstein, Sondheim’s lyrics maintained the clever and concise nature of his

predecessor while leading the postmodern era of musical theater (McLaughlin, 2018, 28-89). Naturally, his unique nature was often off-putting for some. He hit his stride in the 70s with his partnership with Hal Prince that abruptly ended in 1981 due to the failure of *Merrily We Roll Along*. However, it only took Sondheim three years to get back on his feet and write *Sunday in the Park with George* with James Lapine. Despite belonging to two different eras in Sondheim’s career, these two musicals both display Sondheim’s

postmodern creativity the most since his 1970's hit *Company* (Llorente, 2010).

The pivotal nature of these works gives much insight into Sondheim's musical development. Despite its failure at the box office, *Merrily We Roll Along* features a beautiful and complex series of songs, lyrics, and motifs. Because of its unique form, motifs were especially important to keep the show coherent. This is what makes the show perfect to examine for thematic material. Stephen Sondheim in his own book, *Finishing The Hat*, writes, "...Vocal lines in their early lives could become accompaniments for other songs in their later lives, undercurrents or memory, but the audience would hear the accompaniments first" (Sondheim, 2011). Although Sondheim wrote a score which would normally be very appealing to audiences, *Merrily We Roll Along* was a perfect example of how Sondheim was now writing in a different era (Smith, 2007). *Sunday in the Park with George* was the solution. Sondheim was able to achieve "...a balance between breadth and depth, through his postmodern aesthetic adaptations using leitmotivic minimalism to depict pointillism in *Sunday in the Park with George*" (Llorente, 2010, p.1). There was a sense of refinement and renewal with his new partnership with James Lapine.

Methodology

This project investigated these two works as equals and revealed Sondheim's musical and thematic elements within them. Using musical analysis methodology, the music will speak for itself and reveal the connections between the two larger works. Using piano vocal reductions of the scores of six pieces, a harmonic analysis was performed on the scores and then compiled into a spreadsheet to compare and contrast. Three pieces were chosen from each of the two musicals. Stephen Sondheim is a very unique composer, so a musical analysis had to be

performed through many different lenses. This project analyzes the score using common practice figured bass and/or jazz theory analysis as appropriate. This methodology has supplied the necessary tools to sufficiently discover the inner workings of these pieces.

Findings

To choose the pieces to analyze, musical and lyrical themes were considered. In order to most effectively compare the two musicals, pieces about relationships and art were chosen. This was the main idea which could most easily draw a link between these two musicals.

"Finishing The Hat," "We Do Not Belong Together" and "Lesson #8" were the most fitting songs to be analyzed from *Sunday in the Park with George*. Interestingly enough, these three songs all begin with the same harmonic progression. This evinces the strong connection they have with each other and further justifies their selection. The most glaring finding in the analysis of these pieces is Sondheim's use of the bass voice. Often, the bass voice will remain stagnant while the higher voices will change around it. One scholar suggested "He obtains middle ground harmonic cohesion through the use of chromaticism and pedal points" (Purin, 2011). While I understand the appeal of characterizing this as pedal point, I believe bimodality is perhaps a more contextualized way of looking at this. The disjointed relationship between the lower and higher voices could resemble the disjointed relationship George and Dot find themselves in. Also, there are various ostinato patterns which create a trance-like feel in which George completes his work. While this ostinato pattern is interesting, it is even more emotionally impactful to see when Sondheim breaks this pattern. Throughout the pieces, he will often quickly depart from the pattern to create a sort of "effect chord." In both

"Finishing the Hat" and "We Do Not Belong To gether", we seem to depart from this ostinato pattern for longer times when George focuses on Dot, or Dot criticizes George.

"Good Thing Going," "Not a Day Goes By," and "Growing up" were the three pieces which were chosen from *Merrily We Roll Along*. All of these pieces are more functional. However, Sondheim's use of the bass voice is once again very captivating. In this case, I would attribute this to the use of pedal point. A very common technique which Sondheim employs in this music is the Pedal 6/4, where the harmony of a piece shifts from a root position chord to a 2nd inversion while the bass stays the same. This creates a feeling of departure, but a longing for return, and this is analogous to Charlie's longing to return to the way things were. The analysis of these two musicals has revealed that despite a change in compositional style, the way Sondheim conveys and inserts emotion into his music stays fairly consistent. By creating a pattern or a functional tendency, he is able to create an expectation. After his musical expectation is set up, he can create emotional reactions by subverting that expectation or leaving a pattern. In both of these works, a consistent bass note occurs on many occasions. Although this may be used for different reasons, they both create a feeling of home. A change in emotion equals a departure from that home. For example, in "Good Thing Going" Sondheim leaves

the comfortable pattern of [I, IV, I] and introduces III+ chord to create a feeling of uncertainty. Also, in "Finishing the Hat," Sondheim creates a trance-like ostinato which is then broken by a non diatonic series of minor seconds. This represents a change in George's attention from his work to the society around him. Not only are there patterns which connect these two works musically, but there are also concrete musical intervals and chords which Sondheim likes to use to increase his palette. Both works heavily utilize the interval of the 9th. This interval is very interesting because it can be added to almost any chord to add color or light. In both of these works, Sondheim not only employs the 9th to create a beautiful sounding chord, but he uses it to add meaning and depth to his harmonic and emotional ideas.

Conclusion

After the era of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II (Rodgers and Hammerstein), Stephen Sondheim took on the role of continuing the work Rodgers and Hammerstein did for the modern musical. While doing so, he completely reinvented the American musical. Learning how and why brilliant composers create their work is a key element in the creation of new and exciting art. This project provides musicians, composers, and educators with a prime example of how an artist is able to express his art freely and effectively.

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