

VOCAL CHALLENGES IN THE NINE SINGING ROLES OF
STEPHEN SONDHEIM'S SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER
OF FLEET STREET

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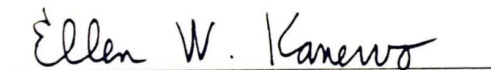
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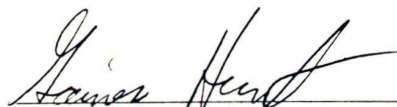

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VOCAL CHALLENGES IN THE NINE SINGING ROLES OF
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OF FLEET STREET

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Richard Soren Daniel

December 1997

DEDICATION

The author dedicates this work to

Robert Sinclair Daniel, Jr.

and

Barbara Lee Beemer Daniel

in recognition of their simply amazing patience and unfailing love and support, and his own good judgement in selecting them as parents over three decades ago.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. Joe Filippo, for his nagging and his cheerleading. My thanks also to the other committee members, Dr. Jeffrey Wood for helping to oil my rusty musical chops just enough, and Dr. Ellen Kanervo for stepping in at the last minute.

Thanks also to: David Vosburgh, who helped me get in touch with the original cast; Tom Lundberg, who introduced me to the music of Stephen Sondheim on a tour bus in 1984; and the folks at Presto Services, for letting me take over their front office.

Finally, thanks are due Beth Fowler, Victor Garber, Ken Jennings, Edmund Lyndeck, James Stenborg, the late Jack Eric Williams, and especially Stephen Sondheim, for their responses to my inquiries.

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ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of the musical challenges that are found in each of the nine singing roles in Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. The work defines and clarifies the difficulties encountered by actors performing the score and offers suggestions as to what compelled Sondheim to create so demanding a piece. After providing background information about Stephen Sondheim in general and *Sweeney Todd* in particular, the paper uses Richard Rodgers' *Oklahoma!* as a standard by which the difficulty of Sondheim's score can be judged. In the end, the difficulty of performing Sondheim's work is confirmed, and the choices he made in creating it are validated in the light of his training and the dramatic requirements of the piece.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study is an examination of the musical challenges that are found in each of the nine singing roles in Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (hereafter referred to as *Sweeney Todd*). The work will attempt to define and clarify the difficulties encountered by actors performing the score and to determine what compelled Sondheim to create so demanding a piece.

Stephen Sondheim is currently among the most successful American composers of musical theatre. While it is true that Sondheim's musicals rarely pay back their producer's investment, they are successful by other measures. He has had twelve of his musicals produced in New York, eleven of them on Broadway, and he has won six Antoinette Perry ("Tony") awards for best score and lyrics. Seven of his musicals have won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Musical, and one was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

In the process of earning these accolades, Sondheim has demonstrated relative indifference to the hit-driven mentality of many of his predecessors. His songs do not fit the standard mold into which Broadway composers have poured their work for decades.

Over the years, Sondheim's music has gained a reputation as being difficult both for the performer and the listener. A case can be built to name *Sweeney Todd* as Sondheim's most difficult score to date. The fact that 80% of the play is sung points in no small way to its demanding nature. Stamina is an element that contributes to the challenge encountered by singers when they approach a piece of music. With so much singing in the piece, it is obvious that presenting *Sweeney Todd* eight times a week, as is often the case on Broadway, could tire the voices of the cast. A simple comparison

between the amount of music in *Sweeney Todd* and the amount found in the scores of other musicals can be made by noting that the published vocal score of *Man of La Mancha* is 150 pages long, and the score of *Camelot* is 236 pages long. The vocal score of *Sweeney Todd*, after roughly 13 pages of dialogue are subtracted, is 367 pages long.

Compounding the problem are the unusual vocal types that the score requires. A countertenor, a lyric soprano, and a lyric tenor are needed in roles that require an operatic quality in their singing. With their more modern harmonic language, it is possible that *Sunday in the Park with George* or *Passion* demand more of a singer's hearing than does *Sweeney Todd*, but the physical vocal prowess required of the cast of *Sweeney Todd* is imposing. For these reasons, and others that shall be explored in Chapter Four, *Sweeney Todd* is a strong example of the challenges that may be found in a Sondheim score.

For the purpose of discussing musical theatre and musicals in general, it is necessary to define some basic terms. This study shall identify a musical as a play in which essential elements in the telling of the story and/or the revelation of the characters are conveyed through the use of song. There are three general components that make up most musicals. These are the book, the lyrics, and the score. The book is made up of the spoken words of the play. The lyrics are those words which are sung. The score is the music to which the lyrics are set and which accompanies dances and other action.

The amount of literature concerning Stephen Sondheim is by no means vast, but it is a growing body of work. Much of the background information in this paper was gleaned from the book, *Sondheim & Co.*, by Craig Zadan. It is an authorized look at Sondheim's career from his teens to his first work on *Assassins*. The book contains interviews with Sondheim and his collaborators. There also is a section devoted to the critical opinions of his detractors. In 1993, theatre critic Martin Gottfried provided additional information when he wrote *Sondheim*, an oversized volume containing

biographical information, many photographs, and critical analyses of Sondheim's work from *Saturday Night* to *Assassins*.

Although the books by Zadan and Gottfried include information about Sondheim's life and work inside and outside of the theatre, most of the academic work concerning Sondheim focuses on projects for the Broadway theatre for which he wrote the music and lyrics. The most general of these is *The American Musical Stops Singing and Finds its Voice: A Study of the Work of Stephen Sondheim*, which is an analysis of Sondheim's work from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* to *Merrily We Roll Along*. Author Joanne Lesley Gordon examines each of these works "in terms of its social, historical and aesthetic context" (Gordon, 1984, ix). The chapter on *Sweeney Todd* goes blow by blow, song by song, detailing elements in the lyrics, music and staging. Gordon has since published *Art Isn't Easy*. It is a condensation of her dissertation that has been updated to include chapters on *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods* (Gordon, 1991).

Other authorities have chosen to concentrate on specific qualities in Sondheim's work. Sondheim's involvement in the development of the "concept musical" is the subject of Daniel J. Cartmell's dissertation, *Stephen Sondheim and the Concept Musical*. Beginning with biographical information and a definition of "concept musical," the author scrutinizes Sondheim's work in *Company*, *Follies*, and *Pacific Overtures*. Cartmell enters into a discussion of the elements of Sondheim's writing that distinguish it from the more traditional Broadway forms (Cartmell, 1983).

The history of the concept musical is further explored by Eugene Robert Huber in *Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince: Collaborative Contributions to the Development of the Modern Concept Musical, 1970-1981*. According to the abstract in *Dissertations Abstracts International* (1990), Huber "... focuses on the unique

relationship between a director and a composer/lyricist in the shaping and framing of the concept musical" (p. 1049A). This paper was unavailable for study.

A more focused, exclusively musical approach is taken by Stephen Blair Wilson in his *Motivic, Rhythmic, and Harmonic Procedures of Unification in Stephen Sondheim's "Company" and "A Little Night Music."* "The perspective taken was that of a conductor analyzing the scores as if in preparation for rehearsing the cast of a production" (Wilson, 1983, p. 2). Wilson is interested in what holds the scores of these two shows together as units. As the title of his dissertation suggests, Wilson undertakes a detailed music analysis in terms of rhythmic, harmonic, and motivic material (Wilson, 1983).

Stephen Banfield's *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (1993) is a commercially available, but serious, volume that explores Sondheim's "music itself, *as music*" (p. 4). Sondheim made his archives available to Banfield, with the result that some early drafts of songs (both music and lyrics) from every phase of his career are included. The book examines Sondheim's compositional techniques in detail.

In contrast to the purely musical approach of Wilson and Banfield, F. Lee Orchard surveys Sondheim's work in terms of its social, historical perspective. *Stephen Sondheim and the Disintegration of the American Dream: A Study of the Work of Stephen Sondheim from "Company" to "Sunday in the Park with George"* is an examination of the composer's work and how it reflects changes in American life from the late nineteen sixties to the middle nineteen eighties (Orchard, 1988).

Sondheim's lyrics are the subject of Michael Charles Adams' dissertation, *The Lyrics of Stephen Sondheim: Form and Function*. In it he discusses the lyrics for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, *Company*, and *Pacific Overtures*. It does not address Sondheim's music or *Sweeney Todd*.

In the pages of the scholarly and popular works about Sondheim that are available for study, it is recognized that his music has, over the years, acquired a reputation for difficulty, and that the difficulty affects the audiences' ability to understand and enjoy the composer's work. Although mention is made of performance challenges found in Sondheim's scores, these problems are not the focus of the writings. In contrast, this study will be directed at the concerns of actors who have to reproduce Sondheim's music, specifically, *Sweeney Todd*.

Chapter Two will be devoted to an overview of Stephen Sondheim's professional, theatrical background. Although he has written incidental music and songs for film and television, this chapter will be limited to his work as a composer and lyricist for live musicals. Chapter Three follows with a discussion of the plot and characters in *Sweeney Todd*. The factors that make Sondheim's music difficult will be explored in Chapter Four. This analysis shall be achieved by examining the differences between the work of Richard Rodgers in *Oklahoma!* and Sondheim in *Sweeney Todd*. Physical and intellectual elements by which to judge these differences will be defined. A discussion suggesting the reasoning behind the composer's choices will ensue in Chapter Five. In the end, the success of those choices will be measured in terms of their ability to shed light on character and their contribution to the overall tone of the play.

CHAPTER II

THE THEATRICAL CAREER OF STEPHEN SONDHEIM

Early in his life, Stephen Sondheim wanted to write songs for Broadway. His mother knew Oscar Hammerstein, who created *Showboat* with composer Jerome Kern and *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, among others, with Richard Rodgers. At the age of 15, Sondheim sought out Hammerstein's professional guidance by asking Hammerstein to evaluate a musical that Sondheim had co-written. In an interview with Diane Sawyer on C.B.S.'s *60 Minutes*, Sondheim told the story:

I had said to him, "Please treat this as if it had just crossed your. . ."--I was 15 years old--"as if it has just crossed your desk and pretend I don't know you," and he said, "All right, in that case, I have to say it's the worst thing that ever crossed my desk. It's the worst thing I've ever seen; it's the most unproducible; it makes no sense." And I was stunned because I was sure he was going to say, "Well look, with a few changes, Dick [Rodgers] and I would like to produce this next fall," and I'd be the first 15 year old to have a show on Broadway. . . he made it very clear that if I were going to ask for it, professional standards, he was going to treat me like a professional, and he was going to show me that this was inept from the first stage direction. (CBS News, 1988)

Hammerstein went on to point out that the work wasn't hopeless. In *Sondheim & Co.*, Craig Zaden (1989) furnishes more details as Sondheim continues the story:

" . . . and he probably saw that my lower lip began to tremble, and he said, 'Now, I didn't say that it was untalented, I said it was terrible. And if you want to know *why* it's terrible I'll tell you.'" Hammerstein proceeded from the very first stage direction to go through every song, every scene, every line of dialogue. "At the risk of hyperbole," Sondheim recalls, "I'd say that in that

afternoon I learned more about songwriting and the musical theatre than most people learn in a lifetime. I was getting the distillation of thirty years of experience. And he did indeed treat me as if I were a professional. He taught me how to structure a song like a one act play, how essential simplicity is, how much every word counts and the importance of content, of saying what you, not what other songwriters, feel, how to build songs, how to introduce character, a story, the interrelationships between lyric and music--all, of course, from his own point of view. But he was at least as good a critic as he was a writer." (p. 4)

Hammerstein created a program for Sondheim to follow that would teach him how to write musicals. Sondheim was to write four musicals; one from a play Sondheim liked, one from a play that needed improvement, one from a non-dramatic source, and one from completely original material. Sondheim completed all of the assignments except for the third by the time he had graduated from Williams College (Zadan, 1989).

Upon graduation, Sondheim studied composition with avant-garde composer Milton Babbitt. Speaking of Sondheim, Babbitt commented:

He made it clear immediately that he wasn't interested in becoming what one would call a serious composer, but he wanted to know a great deal more about so-called serious music because he thought it would be suggestive and useful. . . . He wanted his music to be as sophisticated and knowing within the obvious restraints of a Broadway musical. After all, very few Broadway composers are all that educated. (Zadan, 1989, pp. 6-7)

Armed with such diverse musical and theatrical training, Sondheim was eager to practice his craft for the Broadway stage. The producer of what would have been his first show, *Saturday Night*, died before the musical went into production. His debut would have to wait for the first of his three major collaborators.

Four of the first five Stephen Sondheim musicals that were produced on Broadway were collaborations with playwright Arthur Laurents. For the first two, *West Side Story* (1957) and *Gypsy* (1959), Sondheim worked as a lyricist. Leonard Bernstein, the composer of *West Side Story*, had been attempting to write the lyrics himself, but he was having little success. Laurents, who was writing the book, had heard Sondheim audition some of his own music from the unproduced *Saturday Night* and had liked Sondheim's lyrics. Laurents recommended Sondheim to Bernstein and producer Harold Prince. Although it gave him his first Broadway experience, Sondheim remains highly critical of the lyrics he wrote for *West Side Story* because he believed that they were at times inconsistent with character (Zadan, 1989).

Sondheim's desire was to write both lyrics and music. He thought he was going to get his chance with *Gypsy*, but Ethel Merman, the star of the original production, refused to work with an unknown composer. Jule Stein was recruited to compose the score, and Sondheim was once again relegated to the position of lyricist (Zadan, 1989).

Taking a break from his work with Laurents, Sondheim made his debut as a Broadway composer in 1962 with *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. The book was written by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, and it is based on situations found in plays of the Roman playwright, Plautus. The score was criticized because some authorities, including Sondheim, believed that the tone of the songs was at times incongruous with the book (Gordon, 1984).

In contrast to the farce of *Forum*, 1964's *Anyone Can Whistle* was a musical satire, which reunited Sondheim with Laurents. George Kaufman said that satire is that which closes on Saturday night. He was not far wrong in this case. *Whistle* ran for only nine performances. It remains "one of the theatre's favorite cult musicals" (Zadan, 1989, p. 81).

After the failure of *Anyone Can Whistle*, Sondheim put aside his desire to write both lyrics and music when he begrudgingly agreed to write the lyrics for a new Richard Rodgers musical, which was called *Do I Hear a Waltz?* and which was based on Laurents's play *The Time of the Cuckoo*. Although the play ran for 220 performances, it was not a success. Craig Zadan describes it as "generally insipid" (Zadan, 1989, p. 104).

Having been a part of two box office failures in a row, Sondheim would have to wait five years for his work to return to the Broadway stage. In the meantime, he and playwright James Goldman began work on *The Girls Upstairs*. When it became clear that they would be unable to engage the producer and director they wanted, Sondheim and Goldman put aside *The Girls Upstairs* and wrote a musical for ABC television called *Evening Primrose*. The program aired in 1967 and got generally unenthusiastic reviews. An album by actor-singer Mandy Patinkin contains a suite of songs written for *Evening Primrose*. After their show was broadcast, the composer and playwright resumed their work on *The Girls Upstairs* and continued to struggle to get it produced (Zadan, 1989).

Harold Prince, who had been the producer of *West Side Story*, agreed to produce and direct *The Girls Upstairs* if Sondheim would first write the score and lyrics for another musical Prince was producing and directing. Sondheim acquiesced, and, in 1970, *Company* opened on Broadway. It was the first of three musicals that would bring Sondheim to the level of critical success that he enjoys today, and it began an 11 year association with Prince. It was a new kind of musical in that it had no conventional plot, but George Furth's book was rather a series of vignettes that commented on the state of marriage in New York City. This kind of musical is known as a "concept" musical. That is, its driving force is an idea rather than a story, the latter being the driving force in a

"book" musical. Sondheim and Prince are regarded as the men responsible for the development of the "concept" musical into a distinct theatrical form.

A year later, 1971, saw the opening of *Follies*, which was based on *The Girls Upstairs*. As was the case with *Company*, it has been described as a "concept" musical, the concept being the use of "... the [Weismann] Follies as a metaphor for an American idealism which is found ultimately to be false. . . ." (Cartmell, 1983, p. 188). Its action took place in both the past and the present and centers around a reunion of performers from a Zeigfeld-like Follies show. A recent re-recording of the score in a live performance with the New York Philharmonic has brought about a new interest in the play, and it was revived in London with a re-written book. The New York City Opera is considering adding *Follies* to one of its upcoming seasons (Zadan, 1989).

The New York City Opera has already included a revival of 1973's *A Little Night Music* in its repertoire. Hugh Wheeler's book was based on the film, *Smiles of a Summer Night*, by Ingmar Bergman. This score contains what is probably Sondheim's most popular song, "Send in the Clowns." The entire score is set in triple meter, wherein its rhythmic patterns are organized in groups of three (Zadan, 1989).

Company, *Follies*, and *A Little Night Music* all garnered Tony awards for best music and lyrics. *Company* and *A Little Night Music* won the award for best musical. All three won the New York Drama Critics Circle award for best musical.

Sondheim's next venture on Broadway, and the third of the Prince-Sondheim "concept" musicals (Cartmell, 1983), was *Pacific Overtures* in 1976. John Weidman's book deals with the quick, forced westernization of Japan. It has in it Sondheim's favorite of his songs, "Someone in a Tree." Too much like a history lecture for many, it ran for only 193 performances. It has been revived in an operatic production by the English National Opera (Zadan, 1989).

Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street opened in 1979. It shall be discussed at length in Chapter Three.

Sondheim's next unqualified box office failure was *Merrily We Roll Along*. With a book by *Company*'s George Furth, it ran for only 16 performances. The biggest difficulty audiences had with the show was the fact that the plot proceeded backwards in time from a middle-aged composer's present greed to his youthful idealism and innocence. The theatre community never seems to give up on *Merrily*, as various regional theatres have attempted, along with the authors, to revive and revise the show, hoping to make it work for audiences. With the failure of *Merrily We Roll Along*, Sondheim and Prince's collaboration came to an end. Sondheim entered into a partnership with director-playwright James Lapine that has so far yielded three works. The first, *Sunday in the Park with George*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1985. It was the fictionalized story of Georges Seurat's 1884 painting, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. The first act follows Seurat as he creates the painting. The second act brings the audience to the present and to Seurat's grandson, George. He struggles to find his artistic vision and learns a valuable lesson from Dot, his great-grandmother, who was Seurat's lover. Both Zadan and Gordon have commented on the similarities between George's coming to grips with his craft and his critics and Sondheim's own experience with evaluators of his work (Zadan, 1989).

After the seriousness of *Sunday in the Park with George*, Sondheim wanted to work on humorous material. He did so, and, in 1987, *Into the Woods* opened. Inspired by the works of the brothers Grimm and Bruno Bettelheim's *Uses of Enchantment*, the first act weaves familiar fairy tales with an original one added to tie them together. The second act is new material, and it explores the consequences of the characters' actions in the first. Sondheim won his fifth Tony award for the score (Zadan, 1989).

Returning to more serious material, Sondheim created *Assassins*. The play is about the men and women who have, over the years, assassinated, or attempted to assassinate, United States Presidents. This musical reunites Sondheim with *Pacific Overtures* book writer John Weidman. It has not played on Broadway, but it was presented at Playwright's Horizons in New York, the same theatre at which early work on *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods* took place.

Following *Assassins*, Sondheim returned to work with James Lapine, and *Passion*, which opened in 1994, was the result. Although the show won the 1994 Tony award for best musical, and Sondheim's sixth for best music and lyrics, it ran for less than a year. It was the story of a sickly, unattractive woman's obsessive love for a handsome young soldier (Sondheim & Lapine, 1994).

At the time of this writing, Sondheim is again at work on a new musical with John Weidman. It is to be called *Wise Guys* and will be based on the true story of the Mizner brothers who developed Miami Beach, Florida. It has been commissioned by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and will be presented there upon its completion. It is possible that the show will move to Broadway if investors can be found.

This general overview of Stephen Sondheim's career provides the reader with basic facts relative to this artist's life in the theatre. Further, it serves as a springboard to the following chapter, which focuses specifically on the play under examination, *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.

CHAPTER III

AN INTRODUCTION TO *SWEENEY TODD*

Sweeney Todd opened at the Uris (now the Gershwin) Theatre on March 1, 1979, and ran for 558 performances. The book was by Hugh Wheeler, and it was directed by Harold Prince. Performing in the principal roles were Len Cariou as Sweeney Todd and Angela Lansbury as Mrs. Lovett. The Los Angeles production, starring George Hearn and Angela Lansbury, is available on videotape. *Sweeney Todd* has been revived as a part of the repertoire of the New York City Opera Company and also was revived on Broadway at Circle in the Square in 1989.

There follows a summary of the plot of *Sweeney Todd*. The summary includes scenes that were cut from the original production, because they appear on the cast album and have been included in subsequent productions. After the plot summary, there is a brief description of the characters, their voice types, and the actors who played them in the original production.

Sweeney Todd and Anthony Hope arrive by boat in London. Anthony is a sailor who pulled Sweeney out of the drink after the latter was involved in a shipwreck. Anthony is young and idealistic. Sweeney is heavy set, middle-aged, and has a cynical view of life and of London. He relates to Anthony the story of a young barber, his beautiful wife and his daughter. A judge lusts after the wife and trumps up a charge to have the barber transported to Australia.

Sweeney and Anthony are asked for alms and offered sexual favors by a tattered old beggar woman. She looks at Sweeney and asks, "Hey, don't I know you, mister" (Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, p. 7)? Sweeney routs her away and asks Anthony to leave him. Sweeney has unanswered questions waiting for him in the city.

Sweeney goes to the Fleet Street pie shop of Mrs. Nellie Lovett and asks about the room over her pie shop. She tells him that no one will rent the room because of horrible events that took place there in the past. She tells him the story of Benjamin Barker, a barber. In fact, Barker is the barber who was in the story that Sweeney told to Anthony. Mrs. Lovett recounts the tale of Judge Turpin's desire for the barber's wife. After trumping up a charge that resulted in Barker's transportation, the Judge lured the barber's wife to his home one night. In the presence of guests, Turpin raped Mrs. Barker.

From Todd's strong reaction to her story, Mrs. Lovett is able to deduce that he is Benjamin Barker. Barker is using the name Todd to hide his identity. She tells him that his wife took poison. The Barkers' daughter, Johanna, became Judge Turpin's ward. Sweeney is bent on revenge, but in the meantime he needs a way to make a living. Mrs. Lovett, who is physically attracted to Todd, has saved his silver razors. "You can be a barber again" (Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, p. 19), she tells him. Meanwhile, Anthony sees a beautiful girl on the balcony of a house and is immediately captivated by her. Anthony learns from the beggar woman that the girl is none other than Johanna, the ward of Judge Turpin, the judge who had Benjamin Barker transported. The judge and Beadle Bamford encounter the couple and order Anthony away.

Back on Fleet Street, Sweeney wants to lure the judge into his shop, so he stages a contest of tonsorial skills between him and an Italian street merchant named Pirelli. Sweeney asks Beadle Bamford to officiate and wins easily. The beadle is impressed, saying that he will visit Todd's tonsorial parlour "... before the week is out" (Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, p. 49). Sweeney waits impatiently.

The judge, alarmed at the attention given to Johanna by the sailor, decides to marry her himself. She is repulsed by his offer. Meanwhile, Anthony tells Sweeney of his newly found love. Sweeney realizes that this Johanna is his daughter.

Pirelli enters and threatens to blackmail Todd. Pirelli's name is really Daniel O'Higgins. As a boy he had swept hair for Benjamin Barker, and he has recognized the silver razors. Todd strangles him and stuffs the body in a trunk. At the same time, the dead man's young assistant, Tobias, is downstairs being entertained by Mrs. Lovett. Tobias runs upstairs to fetch his master before O'Higgins is quite dead. Todd manages to send him back downstairs before he can discover the body. Mrs. Lovett gives the lad enough gin to make him fall asleep.

Later, the judge tells the beadle of Johanna's reluctance to marry him. The beadle suggests that the judge is not looking his best, and recommends Todd's services. At the same time, Anthony and Johanna plan to escape during the night and marry on Monday. He will leave her at Todd's while he hires a coach to the port at Plymouth, whence they will sail to France.

At Sweeney's shop, Todd shows O'Higgins's body to Mrs. Lovett. She takes the dead man's purse, which has three pounds in it. The two are musing over what to do with the blackmailer's body, and the boy downstairs, when the judge arrives to avail himself of the barber's skill.

With the judge in Sweeney's shop, Mrs. Lovett excuses herself. As Turpin relaxes in the barber's chair, Sweeney prepares to slit his throat. Anthony bursts in with the news of his impending marriage to Johanna. The judge is infuriated and leaves, vowing to lock Johanna away from the world.

Sweeney goes mad. He throws Anthony out and relates to Mrs. Lovett that he is going to carry out his vengeance on the innocent until his lust for the blood of the judge and the beadle is sated.

Mrs. Lovett reminds him of the body in the trunk, and she arrives at the idea of using the remains of Sweeney's victims as meat for her pies. They close act one musing over the various flavors different kinds of people might have when baked into the pies.

At the opening of Act II, business at Mrs. Lovett's shop has picked up. Sweeney installs a special chair that will send his victims down a chute and into Mrs. Lovett's bakehouse.

Anthony searches for Johanna while Todd calmly and methodically carries out his deeds of revenge. The beggar woman notices the horrible smell coming from Mrs. Lovett's chimney, and she tells the beadle. Anthony finds Johanna, who is confined to Fogg's asylum. The judge has made good his threat to lock her away from the world.

When Anthony tells Todd where Johanna is confined, Todd sends the young man to the madhouse disguised as a wig maker. He gives the sailor a gun in case there is trouble.

Tobias tells Mrs. Lovett that he suspects Todd. On the pretense that she is going to show him the secret of making the pies, she lures him into the bakehouse and locks him in.

Todd writes a letter to the judge, telling him that Johanna wants to be reunited with her guardian. He delivers the note to the judge's house personally. While Sweeney is gone, the beadle arrives at the shop to inspect the bakehouse. Todd gets back in time to offer the beadle a free pomade. The beadle goes upstairs and Todd slits his throat.

Downstairs, Tobias discovers first a hair, then a fingernail in one of the pies. Suddenly, the beadle's body comes down the chute. Terrified, the lad runs down into the cellar.

Anthony arrives at the asylum, and, in the ensuing confusion, Johanna shoots Mr. Fogg. Johanna and Anthony, along with all the other inmates, escape. He takes her to Todd's, and leaves her in the barber shop while he goes for the carriage.

Johanna hides when the beggar woman wanders in. She is looking for the beadle. The older woman looks around and begins to sing a lullaby. Todd bursts in and asks her what she is doing. The judge comes up the stairs. Todd slits the beggar

woman's throat, saying that he has "no time" (Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, p. 163) just as she asks again, "Say, don't I know you, mister" (p. 162)? Todd sends her body down to the bakehouse.

The judge comes into Sweeney's shop. Todd invites him to sit in the chair for a quick primp before Johanna comes upstairs. Todd reveals his identity and slits the judge's throat. The body is sent down the chute, and Todd remembers that Tobias needs to be looked after. He heads out of the door. Turning to retrieve his forgotten razor, Sweeney discovers Johanna, who is trying to sneak out. He is about to slit her throat when a scream is heard from downstairs. The distraction allows Johanna to escape, and Todd goes to investigate.

Downstairs, the judge has grabbed Mrs. Lovett's dress. He has let her go, and Mrs. Lovett has noticed the beggar woman. Alarmed, she tries to drag the body into the oven. Sweeney arrives and tells her to open the oven doors. She warns him not to go near the woman. Todd ignores this, and he recognizes at last that the beggar woman is really Lucy, his wife. Mrs. Lovett explains that Lucy did take poison, but she did not die. Sweeney feigns forgiveness when she claims that she was only protecting his feelings. She didn't want him to know that his wife had become so wretched. Sweeney takes her in his arms and gently guides her in a dance until he throws her into the oven, slamming the door.

Tobias emerges from the cellar. His hair has turned white. Todd pushes him away from him and his dead wife, and Tobias picks up Todd's razor and slits the barber's throat.

The action comes to a close as Anthony, Johanna and the police arrive. Tobias stands alone over the remains of Sweeney, Lucy, Judge Turpin and Beadle Bamford.

The action of the plot is bracketed by a prologue and an epilogue, and it is punctuated by interludes. In the prologue, Sweeney and the members of the chorus set

the mood of the play and sing of the forces that drive Sweeney to his misdeeds. It is a warning of the horrors to come and an invitation to watch. At various times during the play, members of the chorus appear and comment on what has just happened or point the way to the next scene. The epilogue reiterates Sweeney's motives and wonders whether the members of the audience do not have a little piece of Sweeney lurking inside their hearts as well.

Len Cariou starred in the title role of *Sweeney Todd*. The part calls for a bass-baritone because, "I wanted Sweeney to be able to growl. I thought a bass-baritone would be more menacing than a tenor" (S. Sondheim, personal communication, May 30, 1992).

As a comic foil to Sweeney, the role of Mrs. Lovett was created by Angela Lansbury. Mrs. Lovett is practical and amoral. She will do whatever it takes to get by. After all, "Times is hard" (Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, p. 14). "I wanted a belt voice to help carry the comedy" (S. Sondheim, personal communication, May 30, 1992).

Although Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett have both a physical and a practical relationship, the real romance in the story is embodied in the characters of Anthony Hope and Johanna. These roles were created on Broadway by Victor Garber, who was the first member of the original cast to leave the production, and Sarah Rice. Garber is a lyric baritone and Rice is a soprano.

The supporting cast included Edmund Lyndeck, a bass, as Judge Turpin. As played by Jack Eric Williams, the judge's rotund, smarmy, henchman, Beadle Bamford, is a counter-tenor. As the shadow of the woman who owned Benjamin Barker's affection and aroused Judge Turpin's lust, Merle Louise created the role of the beggar women. The role calls for a mezzo-soprano. Tobias Ragg was created by tenor Ken Jennings. Tobias's devious master was Joaquin Romaguera's Pirelli. This role calls for a tenor.

Now that the plot has been summarized, and the characters and actors, with their voice types, have been introduced, it is appropriate to identify the means by which the relative difficulty of the musical score will be evaluated. Chapter Four addresses these criteria for evaluation.

CHAPTER IV

A COMPARISON OF *OKLAHOMA!* AND *SWEENEY TODD*

How can musical difficulty be measured? It is a subjective question. Perhaps the best yardstick is the manner in which a piece of music differs from the familiar. What is it that audiences are used to hearing? Who are the audience members? With what expectations do they arrive? Sondheim's music was created for and exists in the world of the American Musical Theatre. The Broadway audience brings with it a set of expectations created by decades of tradition and practice.

Sondheim's mentor was Oscar Hammerstein. While Hammerstein worked with other composers, he is most noted for his work with Richard Rodgers. Together, Rodgers and Hammerstein revolutionized the musical theatre. With *Oklahoma!*, they introduced the kind of musical in which every element of book, song, and dance was used to further the plot and illuminate character. It is possible that *Oklahoma!* is the most-performed musical in the repertoire. Most people who attend musicals have seen either the stage version or the film, and it is fair to say that it has gone a long way in setting a standard of expectations for audiences. *Oklahoma!* can be used as a norm among Broadway scores.

It is not easy to describe Sondheim's music in general terms. Every score he writes sounds different from the one that preceded it. As Gordon (1984) points out, with Sondheim, "Content dictates form" (p. 28). (In this case the term form is used in its non-musical sense.) One of the reasons *Sweeney Todd* has so much music in it is that Sondheim wanted to use music to heighten the dramatic tension as it does in film scores (Zadan, 1989). *Sunday in the Park with George* uses chord clusters that are analogous to the dots of paint George uses on his canvass. The score for *Follies* provides

show-business numbers because it is about people who were in show-business. Attempts to generalize Sondheim's work have failed because his versatility defies a given style or form. Perhaps it is the fact that an audience member cannot know what to expect from a Sondheim score that makes his work seem inaccessible. Audiences generally know what to expect when they come to a Rodgers and Hammerstein show. Every Sondheim show is different.

As an aid in the examination of the relative difficulty of Broadway scores, it is possible to divide the problems encountered by the performer into two categories: the intellectual and the physical. The intellectual is a function of the singer's ability to learn and involves the degree of predictability of harmony, melody and form, and rhythmic complexity. Physical challenges are those placed upon the singer's voice itself. They include problems associated with range, diction, vocal flexibility, dramatic requirements, and stamina. Put simply, intellectual challenges make a song difficult to learn, and physical challenges make a song difficult to sing. When discussing theatre music it is important to remember that it is at times written to be performed by actors who have little or no musical training. Many actors, including some of the members of the original cast of *Sweeney Todd*, have never studied singing and cannot read music. From Broadway to regional to stock, as well as in educational and community theatre, this lack of musical training is present. In dividing musical challenges into the categories of the physical and the intellectual, this low level of musicianship among actors is acknowledged. Many actors have fine voices but have difficulty counting rhythms or hearing pitches. Others are cast by virtue of their abilities as actors or suitability for their characters rather than for their musical talent; Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady* serves as an example. This chapter compares the scores of *Oklahoma!* and *Sweeney Todd* in the light of these elements, beginning with the intellectual.

During the reign of Rodgers and Hammerstein as the Broadway musical's leading practitioners, the Broadway song was the source of popular music. In the intervening years, as Rock and Roll has become the popular music of the time, the Broadway song has become marginalized. This can be viewed as either a curse or a liberation, for when composers have less need to pander to the popular taste, they are free to indulge their own. Sondheim has had this environment in which to grow and find his voice. It is in his use of the intellectual elements that he displays that voice, and it is here that his music most often comes under fire. Among performers, it is judged to be difficult. The standard dogma among actors is that one should never take Sondheim's music to an audition, both because it is difficult to sing and because pianists cannot play it. The audition notices released by Tennessee Repertory Theatre for the last two seasons forbade auditionees from bringing Sondheim songs to sing unless they brought a tape of the piano part or their own accompanist. This is due in no small part to the fact that his accompaniments are not of the traditional "chunking chord" variety. His harmony does not fit into the old Broadway mold, and this can be demonstrated by comparing it to the Rodgers score.

Richard Rodgers wrote *Oklahoma!* well within the confines of nineteenth century harmony in which a piece of music could be said to travel from order to chaos and back to order. In this model, order is represented by the consonant tonic chord, and chaos by the material that leads up to the penultimate, dominant-seventh chord, which invariably resolves to the order of the tonic in the end. Among the chords he uses there is little ambiguity. This is likely attributable to the show's setting in the "Indian Territory" just after the turn of the century, and it is an appropriate choice. For example, the opening song, "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'," is not harmonically or melodically adventurous. There is one accidental in the melody. The song is in E major and there is

a D-natural on the first syllable of “Mornin’.” It is the suspended fourth of a 4-3 suspension of the sub-dominant chord. There is some use of a diminished seventh chord as dominant harmony. Otherwise, with the exception of a few passing chords, the song is built around the tonic, sub-dominant, and dominant chords. These three chords are the basis for countless popular songs. This is typical of much of the score. All of the songs are in a major key except “Lonely Room.” Here Jud sings of his isolation and bitterness, and Rodgers sets those sentiments in a minor key.

Cartmell (1983) states that, “Sondheim’s music is not always as dissonant as his critics seem to think. What seems like dissonance can often be accounted for by the chromaticism, unusual intervals and modes of his melodies. . . .” (p. 59). While this may be true in the light of art music of the 20th century, by Broadway standards it is very challenging. Zadan (1989) quotes *Gypsy* composer Jule Styne, “Is he trying to impress with a lot of chords? Chords don’t make it. People aren’t listening to chords. And dissonances are marvelous--but they don’t belong in the musical theatre” (pp. 389-390). Although Zadan continues the quote as Styne later expresses admiration for *Sweeney Todd*, the remarks make it clear that Broadway does not always welcome the unusual.

From the first chord, Sondheim places *Sweeney Todd* into a different harmonic world from that of *Oklahoma!*. He begins the optional organ prelude with the dissonance of an F-minor seventh chord. There is no consonance, no order, at the beginning of the evening. There are only relative levels of dissonance. Even when basic harmonic progressions are not unusual, they are clouded by Sondheim’s use of extended tertiary harmony, where thirds are added to the basic triad, thereby adding color and obscuring the tonal center. With harmonies like this, it is easy for actors, particularly if they have little or no experience with 20th century art music (and most actors do not), to

despair of understanding even so mundane a thing as knowing where to find their pitch in the accompaniment. In measure 27 of “No Place Like London”, there is a chord in the lower voices of the accompaniment with no flats or sharps, over which the Beggar Woman must sing a string of accidentals. She is helped by the fact that her vocal line is doubled in the violins; nevertheless, she must find her entrance note of D# when the accompanying chord is spelled A-E-G-B (which is not a consonant chord to begin with). The D# clashes with the E- and A-naturals in the accompaniment, residing a minor second and a diminished fifth from each respectively.

Obviously, melodies within such an unusual harmonic landscape are bound to vary from the traditional major key variety. Broadway music is almost always written in major keys. “Lonely Room” is an example of a song in minor, but it is a special case, as is discussed below. “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,” which is the first sung number in the score, is in Aeolian mode (natural minor). This, once again, establishes Sondheim’s score in territory that is unfamiliar to many Broadway audiences and performers. When they write in a minor key, Broadway composers usually raise the sixth and seventh degrees of the scale, as Rodgers does in “Lonely Room”. This creates major sub-dominant and dominant chords, so as to make the pull towards the tonic stronger. Writing in the Aeolian mode eschews this technique. Banfield (1993) points out areas in which Sondheim uses “touches of Lydian and Mixolydian modality, to which the Dorian mode is added. . .” (p. 293). Such modal writing presents difficulties for singers who are not used to it.

Perhaps Sondheim’s use of rhythm and form is what most sets his music apart from other Broadway composers. In *Oklahoma!*, Rodgers uses simple rhythms. Syncopation is rare, what there is of it being confined to the eighth-quarter-eighth figure, as in the first sung measure of “I Can’t Say No,” and the eighth-dotted quarter

figure, as at the end of the first phrase of “All Er’ Nothin’.” Meters stay consistent. If a song begins in duple meter, it stays there. All of the songs are in 4/4, 2/4, 6/8, 3/4 or *alla breve* (cut) time. There are no odd meters (other than 3/4). Once again, this is an appropriate choice. The story is a simple one about simple frontier folk.

The score of *Sweeney Todd* is another story, and Mrs. Lovett’s introductory song, “The Worst Pies in London” (see Figure 1) is a fine example of this. Note the shifting meters, the entrances on the upbeats, and the uneven phrase lengths.

Figure 1. Measures 36-42 of “The Worst Pies in London.”

36
worst pies in Lon - don. And no won - der, with the price of

39
Tempo 10
(Slams a lump of dough on the counter and begins pounding it)
Meat what it is (grunt) when you get it (grunt) Nev-er (grunt) thought I'd live to see the day men'd think it was a

41
Treat find-ing poor (grunt) an - i - mals (grunt) wot are dy - ing in the street. Mrs. Moo-ney has a

(Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, p. 37)

Anthony's "Ah, Miss" shifts meters in the passage in Figure 2. The meter shifts between odd and even meters, creating a rhythmic environment that can leave a performer feeling off-balance.

Figure 2. Measures 16-21 of "Ah, Miss."

The musical score for measures 16-21 of "Ah, Miss" is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 16, 17, and 18. Measure 16 is in 3/4 time. Measure 17 is marked *a tempo* and is in 3/4 time. Measure 18 is in 3/4 time. The second system contains measures 19, 20, and 21. Measure 19 is in 3/4 time. Measure 20 is in 3/4 time. Measure 21 is marked *mf* and is in 3/4 time. The lyrics are: "glance. Ah, miss, What do you what do you see off there in those trees oh, Won't you give won't you give me a chance? Who would sail to Spain, for all its".

(Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, p.69)

In an interview that aired on PBS's *Live from Lincoln Center* Sondheim talks about learning from Leonard Bernstein about the use of irregular phrase lengths:

When I worked with Leonard Bernstein on *West Side Story*, one of the things I learned from him was not always necessarily to think in terms of two, four, and eight bar phrases. I was already liberated enough, before I met him, not to be sticking to 32 bar songs, but I tend to think square. . . . it's partly because I was brought up on mid-19th, late-19th century music, and. . . there are not an awful lot of meter changes. You often will shorten or lengthen a bar for rhythmic

purposes and for energy, but it's when you switch in the middle, particularly when it's a modest song, when you're not writing an aria--you know, you're writing something like *Sweeney Todd* where people sing at great length, you expect switches of meter because it helps variety--but in a little 36- or 40-bar song, to switch meter around is almost perverse, because the song doesn't get a chance to establish its own rhythm. . . . Lenny taught me to think in terms of, "Do you really need the extra beat or not." Just because you've got four bars of four--you come across a bar and it doesn't need the extra beat--then put a bar of three in. (Goberman [Producer], 1990)

Ken Jennings (personal communication, 1992) says that the most difficult number for him to learn and perform when he created the role of Tobias was No. 9, "Pirelli's Miracle Elixir," and, for him, it was a question of rhythm. Jennings, who does not read music, had difficulty finding his entrances. Indeed, a look at the score will show the observer that during the ensemble passages, Tobias's line from measure 104 to measure 111, for example (see Figure 3), has a three and a half beat phrase entering on the upbeat of one, a two beat phrase entering on two, a four beat phrase on two, a two beat phrase on three, a three beat phrase on two, five beats of rest, a two beat phrase on two, and a three beat phrase on two.

Figure 3. Measure 104-111 of "Pirelli's Miracle Elixir."

104 (To 4th Woman)

Want to buy a bot - tle, mis - sus?

What is

105 (TOBIAS)

(MRS. LOVETT) *f* Pen - ny for a bot - tle. Have you ev - er smelled a clean - er

(TODD) What is this? (Handing the bottle back distastefully) Smells like -- phew!

this? Smells like piss.

1st MAN: Prop - a - gates the hair, sir. 2nd MAN: He says it smells like

4th MAN: I'll take one. 3rd MAN: (To 2nd Man) What was that?

107 (TOBIAS)
smell? How a-bout a sam - ple? How a-bout a sam - ple, mis - ter?

(MRS. LOVETT)
Would - n't touch it if I was you, dear.

(TODD)
Looks like piss. This is piss. Piss with

(2nd MAN)
piss. Wot - cher think?

2nd WOMAN & 5th MAN
Says it smells like piss or some - thing

109 (TOBIAS) *(Trying to calm the crowd)*
Nev - er mind that mad man, mis - ter.

(MRS. LOVETT)
What does that smell like to you, sir?

(TODD)
ink.

WOMEN
Let me smell that bot - tle. I don't want no ink - piss! What is this?

MEN
Let me smell that bot - tle. I don't want no ink - piss! What is this?

mp subito *cresc*

111

(TOBIAS)

Nev-er mind the mad-man.

(MRS. LOVETT)

Give 'em back their mon-ey!

(TODD)

(WOMEN)

Give us back our mon - ey!

(MEN)

What does that smell like to you, ma'am?

(Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, pp. 91-93)

This is hard to count because the phrases are of irregular length, and the rests are of irregular length. While Tobias is counting his rests, other singers in the ensemble have similarly irregular phrases and rests, so that there is no repetitive pattern to the phrases. A passage like this is difficult to learn for those who do not read music, and for the musically literate it is a challenge to memorize. The accompaniment makes things slightly clearer by confining itself to quarter notes on every beat with a strong emphasis on the downbeat of one in the bass. Nevertheless, when a group of actors are singing together on-stage, it is sometimes difficult to hear the orchestra, so such emphases are not always helpful.

While Sondheim's use of irregular phrase lengths contributes to the difficulty of his rhythms, the phrase lengths also are an example of his use of unusual forms. The

standard song form for Broadway musicals is AABA, which is well defined by Cartmell (1983):

By and large, most popular songs follow a similar pattern called the AABA form, or the thirty-two bar song, which consists of four eight-bar sections. This form uses two phrases which are metrically and musically similar (AA), followed by a contrasting phrase or release (B) and a concluding phrase (A) which is similar to the first phrases. The chorus, another name for the AABA section [Rodgers uses the term “refrain”] of a song, is often preceded by a verse which leads into the chorus. The chorus then is generally repeated a few times. (p. 66)

Rodgers uses this tradition as a point of departure. None of the songs in *Oklahoma!* adheres strictly to this formula. His verses are longer than the norm (“All Er Nothin’” has a 68-bar verse with two distinct sections) and he returns to them in the middle of songs, as in “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” and “People Will Say We’re in Love.” He also uses some irregular phrase lengths. “People Will Say We’re in Love” has 16-bar phrases for the first two sections (AA), but the last two (BA) are only eight apiece. Other songs, like “Many a New Day,” are strophic (The chorus is repeated), but their chorus is in some other form, in this case ABA.

The two songs that depart the most from the form defined above take place in the same scene. Curly and Jud are rivals for the affections of Laurey. This is the source of conflict in the play. Curly visits Jud in the smokehouse where Jud lives. In an attempt to persuade Jud, who is a wretched creature, to commit suicide, Curly describes the outpouring of grief that would occur at his funeral. “Pore Jud is Daid” is the result. It has no verse section preceding the chorus, and it has an eight measure melody that is repeated. There is a 12-bar recitative-like section in the middle, some underscored

dialogue, and then a return to the main theme. There is a four measure coda at the end. Later in the scene, when left alone, Jud sings “Lonely Room.” It is in ABB’CAD form:

JUD:

- (A) The floor creaks,
The door squeaks,
There’s a fieldmouse a-nibblin’ on a broom
And I set (sic) by myself,
like a cobweb on a shelf,
By myself in a lonely room.
- (B) But when there’s a moon in my winder (sic)
And it slants down a beam ‘crost (sic) my bed,
Then the shadder (sic) of a tree starts a-dancin’ on the wall
And a dream starts a-dancin’ in my head.
- (B’) And all the things that I wish fer (sic)
Turn out like I want them to be
And I’m better’n that smart Aleck cowhand
Who thinks he is better’n me!
- (C) And the girl that I want ain’t afraid of my arms,
And her own soft arms keep me warm.
And her long, yellor (sic) hair falls acrost (sic) my face,
Jist (sic) like the rain in a storm!

(A) The floor creaks,
 The door squeaks,
 And the mouse starts a-nibblin' on the broom.
 And the sun flicks my eyes,
 It was all a pack o'lies!
 I'm awake in a lonely room.

(D) I ain't gonna dream 'bout her arms no more!
 I ain't gonna leave her alone!
 Goin' outside,
 Git (sic) myself a bride,
 Git me a womern (sic) to call my own. (Rodgers & Hammerstein, 1943,
 pp. 99-103)

"Lonely Room" obviously has little commercial use outside of the score of *Oklahoma!* This is a song about bitterness and obsession, and Rodgers must have known that it was not going to sell much as sheet music. Did this free him to use a song form less in keeping with the popular taste? Most of the other songs are generic enough that they could exist in other shows. For example, is "People Will Say We're in Love" all that different from "If I Loved You" from *Carousel*? "Lonely Room," however, is different. Surely this song points the way for Sondheim, who isn't particularly interested in his songs having a commercial life outside the theatre. According to Cartmell (1983):

Easily recognizable song forms almost disappear by the time of Sweeney Todd.
 Only a few numbers, including 'Green Finch and Linnet Bird,' 'Wait,' 'Pretty

Women,' and 'By the Sea,' have simple forms. Since so much of the action of the show is conveyed through musical numbers, Sondheim uses many complicated verse-like sections with irregular phrases and meters to accommodate the shifts and exigencies of the stage activity, thus creating many 'formless' songs. Mrs. Lovett's first number, 'The Worst Pies in London,' has no less (sic) than seven separate sections with little exact repetition of material . . . (p. 70)

This assessment of the lack of traditional song form in *Sweeney Todd* is accurate. Even the songs to which Cartmell (1983) ascribes simple forms do not conform to the Broadway standard. His phrase "little exact repetition of material" applies here as well. Strophic forms never repeat exactly. Every time the melody returns, there is some variation of pitch, rhythm, or length, either by extension or attenuation. An easy way to verify this is to note that while there are repeat signs in the vocal parts of several of the songs in *Oklahoma!*, there are none in Sondheim's score.

The intellectual elements of harmony, melody, rhythm, and form are very different in these two scores. One might think that the differences between the physical elements would not be so pronounced, but they are.

For example, the ranges required of the casts of *Oklahoma!* and *Sweeney Todd* are quite different. Among the principals in *Oklahoma!*, only Laurey and Aunt Eller exceed Sondheim's general rule of limiting vocal ranges to an octave and a fourth. (personal communication, May 30, 1992) Aunt Eller has two octaves, but the lower octave is written only once when she hums the tune of "People Will Say We're in Love" at the end of a scene. She doesn't have to make words understood in that register. Laurey must sing an octave and minor sixth; Curly an octave and a perfect fourth; Will

an octave and a minor third; Ado Annie an octave and a perfect fourth; and Jud a major ninth.

By contrast, there is not one role in *Sweeney Todd* that falls within an octave and a fourth. Beadle Bamford is written to cover two octaves and a major second if the actor doesn't take the optional lower octave in "Parlor Songs (Part II)." Even with that alteration he covers two full octaves. Sweeney covers two octaves and a minor second in "A Little Priest." Pirelli covers the same interval in "The Contest (Part I)," as does Judge Turpin in "Pretty Women." Mrs. Lovett covers the interval between a low G and a high E during the course of a performance for an octave and a major sixth. Anthony covers an octave and a perfect fifth; Johanna two octaves, from low to high B-flat; Tobias has two octaves and a major second if the optional high C at the end of "The Contest (Part II)" is sung, and one octave and a major ninth if it is not (Interestingly, Ken Jennings does not sing the musical line written for Tobias in this song on the cast album, and the number was cut from the Broadway production. It was reinserted for the revival, but was removed again at Sondheim's request. [Zadan, 1989]); the Beggar Woman sings an octave and a major ninth.

In *Sweeney Todd*, it is not only a matter of the wide ranges of the roles, but also the voice types required. All of the principal male roles in *Oklahoma!* could be sung by either tenors or baritones. Laurey must sing a high A, so she must be played by a soprano. In *Sweeney Todd*, the Beadle is required to sing above high C on more than one occasion. Sondheim (personal communication, May 30, 1992) describes the role as having been written for a counter-tenor. Sweeney and the Judge must sing below the bass clef. Pirelli sings a high C, and must sing with a trained, operatic quality. Johanna shares that operatic quality and sings a high B-flat. Her vocal line within the ensemble climbs to an E-flat above high C.

By the time *Sweeney Todd* was written, Broadway singers had begun to wear wireless microphones. According to George Martin, in the endnotes for his article "On the Verge of Opera: Stephen Sondheim" in the Spring 1989 issue of *Opera Quarterly*, "... about the only thing that amplification at the moment cannot do is extend a singer's range" (p. 85). This is not entirely the case. There is a difference between a singer phonating on a given pitch and a singer projecting that pitch over an orchestra. A singer with a microphone must project his or her voice to the microphone. The amplifier will do the rest. Singers without microphones must project their voices all the way to the back row. Therefore, Sondheim has more freedom to expand the ranges of his characters. Nevertheless, many theatres do not have amplification, and the wide ranges of these roles create difficulties in casting and performance even when such facilities are available.

Microphones also aid in the projection of diction. Some combinations of sounds are more difficult to reproduce than others, and sometimes words can make a passage that is in an extreme vocal register more difficult to sing. An example of Sondheim coming to grips with this appears in a letter from Jack Eric Williams, who played the beadle in the original production:

In the . . . Quartet, #15 ["Kiss Me" (part II)], a number of things were changed, the main thrust of which were the number of syllables in the high tessitura. [Sondheim] had originally written a rather busy, active line in bars 16-27, and perhaps at the end, and I told him that this wouldn't "sound" in that range in my voice, and asked him for sustained material, which he promptly provided. (personal communication, April 26, 1992)

Oklahoma! is not without trouble spots. There is a passage in “Pore Jud is Daid” during which Curly eulogizes at an imaginary funeral for Jud. During this passage, Curly must utter the phrase, “. . . knowed ‘at beneath them two dirty shirts he always. . .” into the span of three beats, which is difficult, even though the tempo marking is “Slowly.” There is little else of difficulty apart from the occasional tongue-twisting phrase such as “high steppin’ strutters” in “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top.”

Diction is wedded to rhythm, and, as has been noted above, *Sweeney Todd* has many passages of complex rhythm. The passages from “The Worst Pies in London” and “Ah, Miss” cited in the discussion of rhythm above, with their rapid patter and shifting meters, could be used as examples of challenging diction, but passages that rhythmically are relatively easy can be daunting as well. During “The Contest,” Pirelli’s rhythms are simple, with constant eighth-notes in 6/8 time, but the tempo is marked at dotted-quarter=144. The words are written in a comically bad Italian accent, and they go by very quickly:

Now signorini, signori,
 We mix-a da lather
 But first-a you gather
 Around, signor-
 Ini, signori,
 You looking a man
 Who have had-a da glory
 To shave-a da Pope!
 Mr. Sweeney-so-smart--
 Oh, I beg-a you pardon--’ll
 Call me a lie, was-a only a cardinal--

Nope!

It was-a da Pope! (Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, p. 42)

There is not one rest in the passage, which begs the question, “Where is the actor to breathe?” The words “signorini” and “signori” are not familiar to most American actors, so they add to the challenge. Such passages often must be committed to memory before they can be executed well. Actors speak of getting such sections into their “muscle memory” so that they become second nature to them.

Passages requiring great vocal flexibility are often treated the same way. Vocal flexibility is the facility with which the voice can negotiate florid passages of music. Perhaps the most well-known musical figure that demands a great deal of vocal flexibility is the melisma, where more than one note is sung per syllable of text. To use a famous example from the world of choral music, in Handel’s chorus “For Unto Us a Child is Born” from *Messiah*, in the second entrance of the sopranos, they sing one note per syllable on the words “For unto us a child is. . . .” The word “born” is sustained over a sequential passage containing 57 notes. There is nothing in either of the present Broadway scores that requires that level of vocal facility. Perhaps *Oklahoma!*’s “Many a New Day,” with its angular melody containing leaps of fifths, sixths, and sevenths, presents the most vocally dexterous passages in the Rodgers score. But the fact that each note is sung on a different word negates much of the challenge. In fact, choral groups sometimes use a quiet consonant to aid in the execution of melismas. For example, “For unto us a child is bo-do-do-do. . . .” This technique cannot be heard by the audience. Like Rodgers’, Sondheim’s score contains no melismatic passages. Johanna’s song, “Green Finch and Linnet Bird,” does contain a trill in measure 54. This bit of coloratura means the song probably requires the most flexibility of any in either

score. It is fair to say that this is the one element in which the least difference between the two scores is found either intellectually or physically.

The difference between the dramatic qualities of the two scores could not be much greater, however. The dramatic context of a song affects the way it is to be sung. In *Oklahoma!*, while the songs do contribute to character and story, they rarely contain the action of the plot. In other words, the songs are usually about how someone feels or thinks. "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" is about the weather. "Kansas City" is a paean to modernity. "All Er Nothin'" is about jealousy and fidelity, but it is playful, if earnest. The singing style might best be described as simple, with a pleasing tone and a hint of regional dialect. Nothing in the score calls for histrionics. The story revolves around two men vying for the affection of the same woman, and that woman has already made up her mind. It can be said that the conflict arises out of Jud's refusal to accept the truth of the situation. In any case, although Jud becomes murderous in the end, he does not attain Sweeney's level of homicidal mania. Only "Lonely Room" is an angry song, and it is more about self-pity, obsession, and resolution than anger. It is a dramatic moment when Jud resolves that he will no longer be satisfied with pictures of women and that he will have Laurey. As dramatic as it is, it is not on the same level as Sweeney's line, "They all deserve to die" (Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, p. 87)! The stakes in *Sweeney Todd* are much higher, and they call for a higher level of dramatic singing. The first blood is spilled two thirds of the way through the first act, and the violence escalates. In Jud's case, he resorts to violence only after he has been defeated. Laurey is afraid of Jud because she thinks he is dirty and unpleasant. Johanna is afraid of Sweeney because she thinks he is going to kill her. Sweeney has revenge on his mind before his first entrance. The first couplet he sings is, "Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd./He served a dark and a

vengeful god" (p. 3). The lyric of "Lonely Room" has been cited above. Compare that to the lyric of "Epiphany":

There's a hole in the world
 Like a great black pit
 And it's filled with people
 Who are filled with shit
 And the vermin of the world
 Inhabit it--
 But not for long!

They all deserve to die!
 Tell you why, Mrs. Lovett,
 Tell you why:
 Because in all of the whole human race, Mrs. Lovett,
 There are two kinds of men and only two.
 There's the one staying put
 In his proper place
 And the one with his foot
 In the other one's face--
 Look at me, Mrs. Lovett,
 Look at you!

No, we all deserve to die!
 Tell you why, Mrs. Lovett,
 Tell you why:

Because the lives of the wicked should be--

(Slashes at the air [with a razor])

Made brief.

For the rest of us, death

Will be a relief--

We all deserve to die!

(Keening)

And I'll never see Johanna.

No, I'll never hug my girl to me--

Finished!

(Turns on the audience)

All right! You, sir,

How about a shave?

(Slashes twice)

Come and visit

Your good friend Sweeney--!

You, sir, too, sir--

Welcome to the grave!

I will have vengeance.

I will have salvation!

Who, sir? You, sir?

No one's in the chair--

Come on, come on,

Sweeney's waiting!

I want you bleeders!

You, sir--anybody!

Gentlemen, now don't be shy!

Not one man, no,

Nor ten men,

Nor a hundred

Can assuage me--

I will have you!

(To MRS. LOVETT)

And I *will* get him back

Even as he gloats.

In the meantime I'll practice

On less honorable throats.

(Keening again)

And my Lucy lies in ashes

And I'll never see my girl again,

But the work waits,

I'm alive at last

(Exalted)

And I'm full of joy!

(He drops down into the barber's chair in a sweat, panting)

(Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, pp. 87-89)

Obviously, Sweeney's level of agitation is much higher than Jud's, and it calls for a higher level of dramatic intensity. In a Broadway play, such intensity usually results in loud, strident, singing, which can wear out the voice very quickly.

It is apparent that all of the physical challenges encountered by singers eventually require that they develop vocal stamina. After all, the vocal instrument is a group of muscles that has to be trained. Broadway plays and musicals typically are performed eight times per week. If the voice is not properly trained, warmed up, and cared for, it will suffer fatigue and may eventually become damaged. As each of the separate physical elements of singing becomes more demanding, more stamina is required of the singer's voice. Broadway singers often sing in a "belt" voice, that is, they sing everything in their chest voice without crossing into their head voice. As noted in Chapter Three, Angela Lansbury was cast partly because she belts well. While belting is a time honored practice on the Broadway stage, it nevertheless adds to the stamina required of singers, since it relies on forcing the air through the larynx rather than the use of resonance to achieve vocal projection.

By now it should be obvious that there are vast differences in the demands made upon singers in these two scores, both intellectually and physically. Chapter Five is a discussion of these differences with explanations suggesting why they exist.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Is the music of *Sweeney Todd* more challenging for the actors than that of *Oklahoma!*? It is more difficult to learn, because the harmonies, melodies, rhythms, and forms are more complex than those of the older score. It is more difficult to sing, because the ranges are wider, the words come with a rapidity that makes diction difficult, and the dramatic requirements are more intense.

Why is the score to *Sweeney Todd* so difficult? There are a number of possible answers. Rodgers' "Lonely Room" provides one very pragmatic clue. As stated in the previous chapter, this song had no commercial possibilities outside the context of the show, so Rodgers was free to use more challenging intellectual elements in the song. His use of harmony and form (Hammerstein's lyric may have provided the form) in "Lonely Room" is much different from the rest of the score. Over 30 years later, when Sondheim was writing *Sweeney Todd*, he was operating with the knowledge that *none* of his songs would have any significant commercial life outside of the show (although there was a disco version of "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd" released as a single), so he was even more at liberty than was Rodgers to indulge his artistic sensibilities. That indulgence resulted in his use of the elements from Chapter Four in more complex ways.

Beyond that, the particulars of character and plot contribute to the piece's complexity. Serial murder and cannibalism are not light subjects. They do not call for light music. Although the material is not treated with the gravity that naturalism would demand, the music is appropriately uneasy. *Sweeney Todd* is, after all, a "thriller," and therefore it exploits horrible events depicted in such a way as to excite an audience. Like Jud in *Oklahoma!*, Sweeney is a character with violent mental illness, but Sweeney is

much more dangerous. Jud's objective is revenge against Curly for winning Laurey. Sweeney resolves to wash Judge Turpin's sins in the blood of the world. In "Epiphany," Sondheim sought to portray a man whose mind was cracking, and he used shifting rhythms and meters to help illustrate that. Gordon (1984) states that, "The splintering of his personality is reflected in the abrupt changes in music and lyrics" (p. 412). The dramatic content of the song requires shouting as much as singing. The shifting rhythms of "The Worst Pies in London" serve to elucidate Mrs. Lovett's flighty character, just as similarly shifting rhythms and meters in Anthony's "Ah, Miss" help convey his excitement at having seen Johanna for the first time.

The complexities of harmony and melody can be justified by the show's status as a thriller. Quoted in Zadan (1989), Sondheim states, "What I wanted to write was a horror movie. The whole point of the thing is that it's a background score for a horror film, which is what I intended to do and what it is. All those chords, and that whole kind of harmonic structure. . . had a wonderful Gothic feeling. It had to be unsettling, scary, and very romantic" (p. 246). As noted in Chapter Four, the harmonies are unsettling from the first chord. Sondheim eschews consonance for the unsettling world of relative dissonance through the use of extended tertiary harmony.

As the harmony is different, so the forms used are different from the standard. Sondheim had abandoned standard song form long ago, but he specifically justifies the irregular phrases in *Sweeney Todd* by noting the long passages of singing in the score and how shifts of form and phrase length help to create variety (Goberman [Producer], 1990).

The difficulties found in the rhythm are warranted by the off-balance characters and their actions. Mrs. Lovett's quirkiness and distractedness in "The Worst Pies in London" are well portrayed by the shifting metric pattern in the song. Anthony's ardor for Johanna is ample justification for the rapidity of his delivery in "Ah, Miss" and "Kiss

Me." The complexity of the ensemble writing in "Pirelli's Miracle Elixir" imitates the bustle of the crowd and mirrors its anger as the scene progresses.

In terms of its physical difficulties, the most imposing of these is his use of wide vocal ranges. This can be partially attributed to the practice of using wireless microphones on performers, but it is more likely that these wide ranges are used to heighten the impact of the broad characters and the violent emotions they experience. Perhaps an octave and a fourth is not enough to contain the rage of Sweeney, the mirth of Mrs. Lovett, the passion of Anthony and Johanna, the grief and madness of the Beggar Woman, the innocence of Tobias, the treachery of Pirelli, and the evil of the Judge and the Beadle. *Sweeney Todd* is a "musical thriller" (Sondheim & Wheeler, 1979, title page), and as such the passions expressed by the characters are larger than life. This status as a thriller also gives rise to the greater dramatic requirements placed upon the actors.

The diction problems are explained in the same light as the shifting meters. Excitable characters speak, and therefore sing, excitedly. The rhythms are a product of this excitement, and the diction is a product of the more rapidly passing rhythms.

All of these features combine to provide the completely dark and threatening world which the characters inhabit. That this world is created so convincingly is the measure of the effectiveness of Sondheim's choices. He wanted never to allow the audience to relax, and his music insures that they will not. The question of whether or not his choices help to illuminate plot, character, and the overall tone of the play is answered by the discussions of the logic that influenced those choices. The members of a Broadway audience, hearing this music, would conclude that something dark was afoot even if they were not shown the action and told the story. The music is that evocative.

In conclusion, Sondheim's music is always challenging. Chapter Two demonstrates that Sondheim's subject matter has never been easy or expected, and neither has his music. Sondheim is a trained musician who studied under a serious composer. His

work is bound to reflect that. While he certainly tailors his scores to be appropriate to the story and the characters, those stories and characters are outside of the mainstream. His music must follow them there. If it is assumed that Sondheim has no perverse desire to forever remain a cult figure, it must be concluded that he writes as he does because he refuses to compromise his beliefs about what is right for his scores in order to write music that will please the masses.

It is possible that the kind of show Sondheim writes will die with him. Rock music pervades the Broadway stage, and the age of the long-running British spectacle is here. In a world where the value of an item, even a work of art, is judged by how well it sells, there is little room for the experimental, and there is little tolerance for it. Banfield (1993) quotes Sondheim's notes from his early work on *Merrily We Roll Along*, "Pop Groups are 'genius' --where does that leave Stravinsky" (p. 311)? Where does it leave Sondheim? Time will tell.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX ONE

**A CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING OF THE MUSICALS OF
STEPHEN SONDHEIM PRODUCED IN NEW YORK**

As lyricist:

West Side Story (1957)

Music by Leonard Bernstein

Book by Arthur Laurents

Gypsy (1959)

Music by Jule Stein

Book by Arthur Laurents

Do I Hear a Waltz? (1965)

Music by Richard Rodgers

Book by Arthur Laurents

As composer and lyricist:

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (1962)

Book by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart

Anyone Can Whistle (1964)

Book by Arthur Laurents

Company (1970)

Book by George Furth

Follies (1971)

Book by James Goldman

A Little Night Music (1973)

Book by Hugh Wheeler

Pacific Overtures (1976)

Book by John Weidman

Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street (1979)

Book by Hugh Wheeler

Merrily We Roll Along (1981)

Book by George Furth

Sunday in the Park with George (1984)

Book by James Lapine

Into the Woods (1987)

Book by James Lapine

Assassins (1991)

Book by John Weidman

Passion (1994)

Book by James Lapine

"LONELY ROOM"

No 15

Lonely Room

Chor. Jui: What am I doin' in this smokehouse?
a-crawlin' and a-festerin'!

Moderato

VOICE

Piano

Cl. Va.

p

pp

Fl. & Harp

Re. Voc.

The floor creaks, The door squeaks, There's a

field-mouse a-nib-blin' on a broom And I set by my-self, like a

Cl. Ds.

cob-web on a shelf. By my-self in a lone-ly room But

Dr. M.

II *Allegretto tempo*

when there's a moon in my win-der And it

Hp.

Sigs. WW pp

slants down a beam 'erost my bed, Then the

The first system of the musical score. The vocal line (treble clef) begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, and G5. The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features a continuous eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a simple bass line in the left hand. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

shad-der of a tree starts a - danc-in' on the wall And a

+ Hms.

The second system of the musical score. The vocal line continues with quarter notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, and G5. The piano accompaniment continues with the same eighth-note pattern. A tempo marking "+ Hms." is present below the piano part.

dream starts a - danc-in' in my head. And

The third system of the musical score. The vocal line continues with quarter notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, and G5. The piano accompaniment continues with the same eighth-note pattern.

all the things that I wish fer. Turn

19

The fourth system of the musical score. The vocal line begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, and G5. The piano accompaniment continues with the same eighth-note pattern. A repeat sign is visible at the end of the system.

out like I want them to be And I'm

This system contains measures 1 through 4. The vocal melody is in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The piano accompaniment is in treble and bass clefs. The lyrics are: "out like I want them to be And I'm".

bet-ter 'n that smart Al - eck cow - hand Who

This system contains measures 5 through 8. The vocal melody continues in treble clef. The piano accompaniment continues in treble and bass clefs. The lyrics are: "bet-ter 'n that smart Al - eck cow - hand Who".

thinks he is bet - ter 'n me! And the

This system contains measures 9 through 12. The vocal melody continues in treble clef. The piano accompaniment continues in treble and bass clefs. The lyrics are: "thinks he is bet - ter 'n me! And the".

27 girl that I want aint a - fraid of my arms. And her

This system contains measures 13 through 16. Measure 13 is marked with a box containing the number "27". The vocal melody continues in treble clef. The piano accompaniment continues in treble and bass clefs. The lyrics are: "girl that I want aint a - fraid of my arms. And her".

own soft arms keep me warm. And her

long, yel-ler hair falls a-crost my face, Jist like the rain in a storm!

35 Moderato

The floor creaks, The door squeaks, And the

mouse starts a - nib-blin' on the broom. And the sun flicks my eyes, It was

all a pack o' lies! I'm a - wake in a lone - ly room I

+ Br.
Hns.

Allegro

aint gon-na dream 'bout her arms no more! I aint gon-na leave her a -

Tutti
mf

Hp.

Tempo I

lone! Go - in' out-side, Git my-self a bride,

rit.

cresc.

Git me a wom - ern to call my own.

cresc.

rit.

ff

R.H.

attacca

Richard Soren Daniel was born in Troy, North Carolina, on June 13, 1960. His family moved to Tennessee in 1962. He is a 1978 graduate of Northwest High School in Clarksville, Tennessee. He graduated from Austin Peay State University in 1984 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Music Education. He graduated from Austin Peay State University once again in 1997, earning a Master of Arts degree in Communications.

He is a professional actor, having appeared in productions at Nashville Children's Theatre, Mockingbird Public Theatre, Birmingham Children's Theatre, Nashville Shakespeare Festival, Cumberland County Playhouse, Fort Worth Shakespeare in the Park, Fiesta Texas, and Chaffin's Barn Dinner Theatre as well as doing music video and commercial work.