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The Melopoetics of Broadway Song

By Stuart Barr

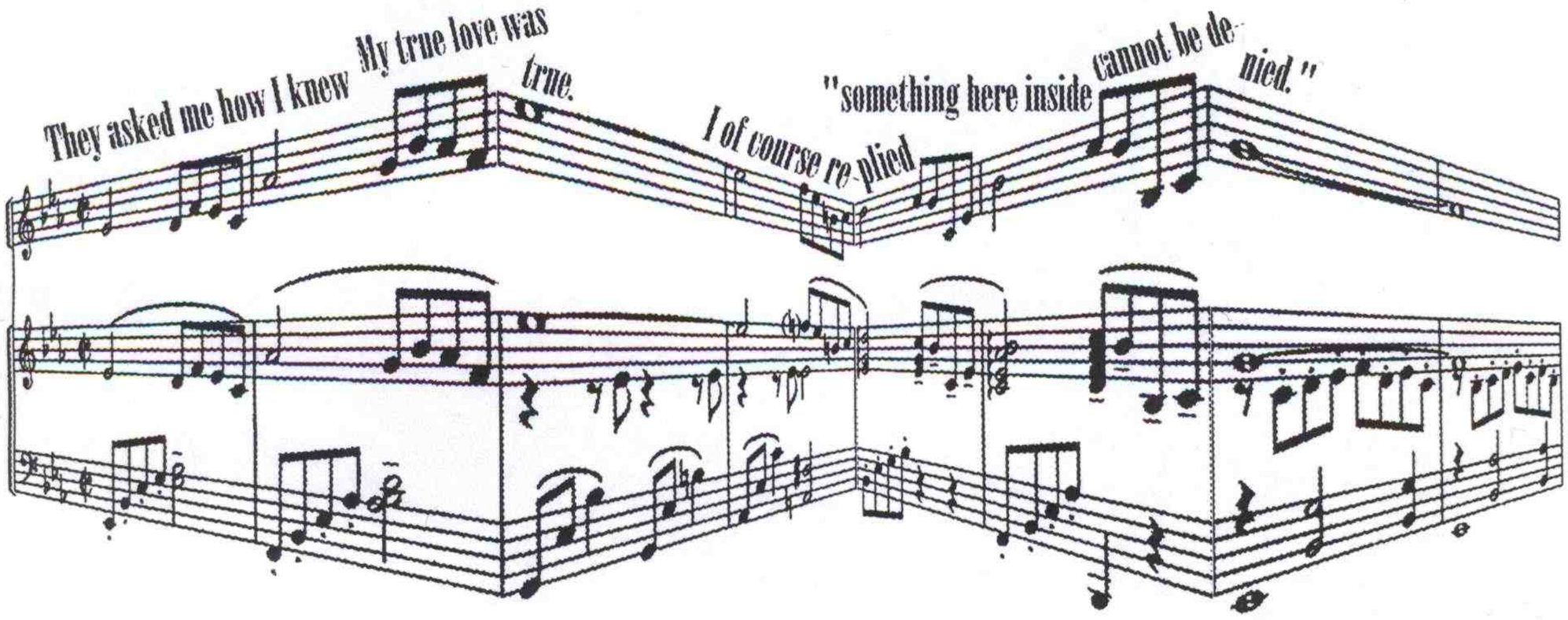
MPhil Thesis, 1995
University of Cambridge, Music Faculty
Supervised by Dr Robin Holloway

Published online at www.stuartbarr.net/publications
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To cite, please use:

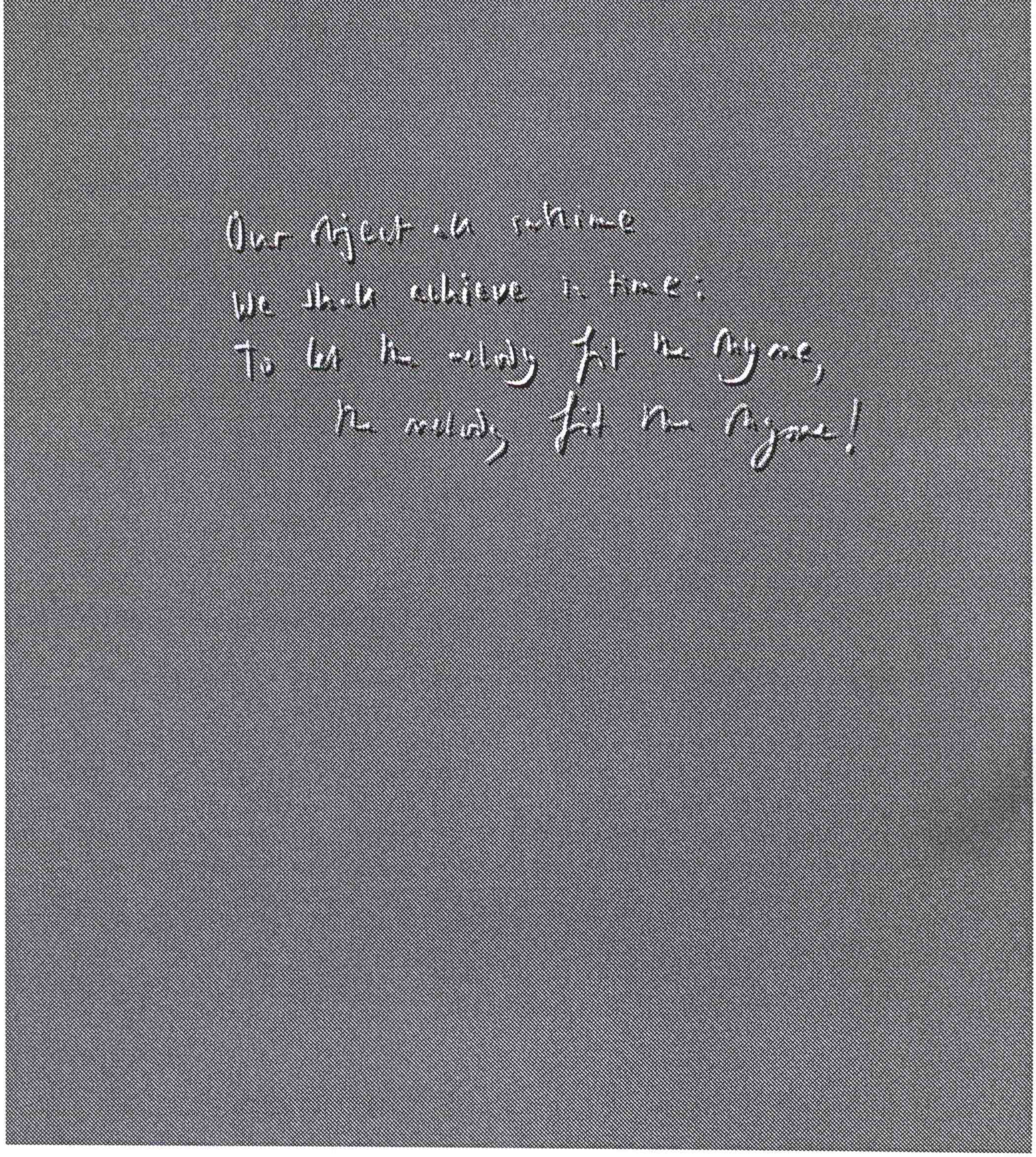
Barr, S 1995, "The Melopoetics of Broadway Song", MPhil Thesis, The University of Cambridge, http://www.stuartbarr.net/publications/

The Melopoetics of Broadway Songs



by

Stuart Barr


Our Object on Sublime
We shall achieve it here;
To be the only fit Image,
The worldly fit Image!

Preface

BBC Radio 2, a local youth theatre and the William Barclay Squire Essay Prize are the genesis to this thesis. Having been brought up in a home torn between the trappings of the classics and the perils of the weekly Top 20 pop charts, I grew up to appreciate the best in all types of music. With an undergraduate degree in music giving me the necessary tools to explain my wide taste in music, a post-graduate course presented the opportunity to rationalise the popular end. The analysis within this document is the goal of that rationalisation: to discover what is best in the music theatre songs of Broadway, using analytical techniques from musicology and literary studies, and devising new ones in the process. The result is crystallised in the title here: that what defines the Broadway style is its particular relation between lyric and music – melopoetics.

The relationship between theory and performance practice of a vernacular music is necessarily closer than in 'art' music; my background includes much experience in the genre: from musical direction, acting, singing, writing, producing, stage managing and to... enjoying it! A love of music in the theatre and of the works contained herein accounts for much of this work. Broadway exists first and foremost to be enjoyed. Analysis thereof must consequently be with the aim of rationalising that enjoyment. If that makes both content and form of this thesis more vernacular than is normal, then I have only the music to blame.

Background resources for the thesis were limited. Little analysis on the genre has been published – and even less on melopoetics. Due its vernacular nature, what has been published are mainly anecdotal/historical books: fascinating, but of limited use. Despite extensive bibliographic searching for relevant theses and dissertations related to my topic, very little came to light. Of the ones covering music from Broadway, none were relevant to the present study. This explains the small size of the bibliography included as an appendix.

Many people have aided my study in ways intellectual and financial: my family, Professor Stephen Banfield, Sir David Calcutt Q.C., Randall Eng, Mark Etherington, Matthew Mitchell and Threshold Theatre Company, Dr. Laurence Picken, Laurie Sansom and Tim Sutton. As a supervisor, Dr. Robin Holloway has been of immeasurable help: encouraging yet never overbearing, and always applying a much-needed broad perspective to the material presented. My gratitude to all the above is presented within.

Gonville & Caius College,
Cambridge.
August 1995

Contents

Preface				*ii*
Contents				*iii*
Introduction				1
1	–	Irving Berlin:	"Play a Simple Melody"	5
2	–	George & Ira Gershwin:		
			"The Man I Love"	18
			"Fascinating Rhythm"	27
3	–	Jerome Kern & Otto Harbach:		
			"Smoke Gets In Your Eyes"	41
4	–	Cole Porter:	"You're The Top"	49
5	–	Richard Rodgers & Oscar Hammerstein II:		
			"If I Loved You"	61
6	–	Leonard Bernstein & Stephen Sondheim:		
			"Somewhere"	70
7	–	Stephen Sondheim:		
			"A Little Priest"	80
Conclusion				94
Bibliography (Primary & Secondary Sources)				96
Glossary				99
Stage-Works Lists				101

Under Separate Cover: primary resource copies

Cover: "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes" from *Roberta* Jerome Kern & Otto Harbach
Frontispiece: from *Lady in the Dark*, lyric by Ira Gershwin; in the hand of Robin Holloway.

Introduction

The Broadway musical is America's largest contribution to twentieth-century culture. A condensation of European operetta, revue, legitimate theatre, music-hall and farce, it spans the gamut of Americana: from brash commercialism to a sparkling combination of fine melody and dramatic integrity with wide appeal. By providing entertainment for the whole of the American populace, it is loaded with more sociological significance than most 'art' music. The very best songs from the shows have become standards known by millions worldwide: an audience that neither Gershwin, Weill nor Bernstein would have found had they composed works only for the concert hall. High art rises and is remembered by later generations whilst low art falls into oblivion; history has dictated that all the earlier songs analysed here are still standards and so represent the finest in the genre.

A crucial part of the Broadway musical æsthetic is its vernacularity. With a genre ultimately commercially governed, it must identify closely with an audience. Thus the finest songs presented here are successful despite (or perhaps because of) the vernacular limitations on song-forms, tonality, rhythm, metre, lyric grammar, sentiment and respectability of language. Many regard 'hummability' as the definer of a good Broadway melody; in an era before mass-media, Broadway (and its close relatives Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood) songs were sold to audiences by their being able to remember them. This is the source of the thirty-two bar **AABA** refrain form that dominated the genre from the early 1930s onwards; it is easily cognitable, sharing much in common with classical ternary forms.

In the past century, Broadway has been transformed from theatrical naïvety to towards total art work. In the early days, the musical theatre was a place of romantic escapism, where boy met girl and sang a clichéd love song, and huge chorus lines of scantily-clad girls high-kicked their way through toe-tappingly good up-tempo tunes with lyrics about telephones and motor-cars; the modern-day musical might revolve around social grievances, touch on sadomasochism and/or chart the assassination of American presidents. Musically, the genre has moved on too: from discrete love songs and up-tempo production numbers to sung-through musico-dramatically-integrated compositions complete with leitmotives. Because of commercialism, progress in the genre has been haphazard. Great works such as *Showboat* (1927), *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) and *Lady in the Dark* (1941) were artistic landmarks and popular successes but had little immediate influence, yet *Oklahoma* (1943) and *Carousel* (1945) changed the form of the Broadway musical instantaneously.

Academic work in the popular arts is still in its infancy: the Broadway musical being no exception. Until recently, the only publications have either tackled the history or the lyrics, the most important in the latter category being Philip Furia's *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley*. In discussing the musical aspects of the genre, Alec Wilder's *American Popular Song* carries the weight of a highly-respected practitioner, yet his often personal likes and dislikes show through the self-admittedly amateur attempts at meaningful analysis.

The opposite problem occurs in Joseph Swain's *The Broadway Musical*, where prescriptively-classical musicological analysis is performed upon material possessing a completely different æsthetic. By misunderstanding Broadway musicals as operas, all examples are patronisingly loaded with the charge that they are inferior to the stage-works of the classical masters; ill-suited analysis eats itself when it cannot find its intended diet. Of the writers shrewd enough to apply objective æsthetic observation, Stephen Banfield approaches *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* from the musico-dramatic standpoint, creating new analytical techniques where necessary to deconstruct Sondheim's complex musical drama. "Melopoetic analysis" derives from Banfield's book where it exists in basic fashion as part of wider analyses. Although never being explicit, Banfield hints that it is the melopoetic relationships that define Sondheim's æsthetic. The present author has taken up that gauntlet and applied it to whole genre. Graphic analytical tools presented here are very remote from Banfield's mainly textual descriptions; the intent is to concentrate on rhyme and syntax, being fundamental formal qualities readily discernible by the average audience member. Like all ethnomusicological research, discussion on Western popular music is at its most useful when tackled from the listeners' perspective rather than the creators': the "emic" rather than the "etic" approach. The former is the approach of the current writer.

Uniquely in Western music, the genre usually gives equal artistic weight to both music and lyric. Except where music and lyric are written by the same person (Berlin, Porter, Sondheim and occasionally Bernstein and Rodgers), songs are always referred to as by both lyricist and composer: the Gershwin brothers, Kern & Hammerstein, Rodgers & Hart. That we think of *Peter Grimes* being a Britten opera, not a Britten & Slater opera, demonstrates this difference.

Melopoetical analysis attempts to get to the root of the relationship between the two artistic inputs: the inference being that this relationship is a key signifier to the listener. Before this can take place, both literary and musical analyses have to be carried out in order to feed the graphical melopoetic tools. Where a printed lyric seems to be deficient or erroneous in punctuation (a common publishing fault), "virtual punctuation" has been applied, according to the rules of natural speech patterns. Musically-reductive analytical techniques are employed where necessary, but their use here is very stylised; features relevant to cognition in the genre have been emphasised, whilst less relevant ones have been discarded. They should not be regarded as "Schenkerian".

A chronological path has been taken, with key songs along the way taken as case studies. Genre-acclimatisation for the reader has precluded anything other than very intense studies of only a handful of songs. The choice presented is naturally subjective, but the aim has been to cover all the main collaborators whilst showing the contrasts in the genre, using solely the most successful songs. One song has been analysed by most collaborators, with the exception of the Gershwins, where two contrasting songs have been included in order to provide for comparison between styles. Omissions are the result of lack of space: Rodgers & Hart and Lerner &

Loewe in particular. For a similar reason, no mention is made of the English side of the genre in Ivor Novello, Sandy Wilson, Lionel Bart and Andrew Lloyd Webber. Particularly regrettable is the omission of the modern pan-globally corporate musical of the 1980s; both Lloyd Webber & Hart's *Phantom of the Opera* and Boublil & Schönberg's *Les Miserables* have now run longer than any musical discussed in this thesis. Nor is there any room to mention the phenomenon of the rock musical or rock opera.

The use of Sondheim as a reference-mark against many of the previous collaborators is intentional. Stephen Sondheim is the Arnold Schoenberg of Broadway: simultaneously providing links between all that has come before, forging ahead with radical ideas and acting as pedagogue for the next generation. If any unwanted criteria have been applied in the analyses, it is through unavoidable comparison with Sondheim.

A problem that could easily suffocate research of the genre if approached from a musicological perspective is that of the "score". No *urtext* exists for any work in the genre, neither can one exist. In dramatic situ, a song is the artistic result of the composer, lyricist, director, orchestrater and the performer; ie. a collaborative 'arrangement' of the composer/lyricists' work is part of the genre. Sheet music is substantially arranged to fit commercial needs, whilst vocal scores often differ from hired performance material. Aside from *West Side Story* and *Candide*, no published full scores exist; few modern works even have published vocal scores. It is in the nature of the genre that new productions of a work will require changes to be made to the score: even new songs to be written on occasions. Thus one version of a work is rarely regarded as the definitive score. In the case of Irving Berlin, he was not staff-notation literate, relying instead on others to prepare his songs for him: an urtext here would not have the same meaning as it would for Gershwin. If instead of this suffocation, a musico-dramatic approach is taken to the analysis, the "score" presents less of a problem, because the relevant qualities tend to transcend arrangement. Therefore a mixture of vocal scores and sheet music have been used as primary sources: vocal scores being the first choice, with sheet music only resorted to where a vocal score was unobtainable.

Much research still needs to be done on the Broadway musical. Little has been written on the sociological aspects outlined at the start of this introduction. There is a particular paucity of 'new musicological' material; the role of female as icon in the early musical through to the feminist 'torch' characters of *Gypsy* (1959) onwards is an important area because of the weight the genre carries in popular culture. Study into the role of Broadway musical theatre as the successor to opera in the twentieth century would provide a much-needed wider perspective of the genre. Melopoetic analysis is still in a fledgling state, and refining of the tools created here would be very desirable. Ethnomusicological research into the melopoetics of other vernacular musical theatres and Western art music might provide a global theory of melopoetics and aim at a cognitive theory. Psychoacoustical research could also be carried out to arrive at such a theory of melopoetic receptivity.

Melopoetic research in the genre has practical applications in performance practice. With sufficient knowledge about how grammars interact in a particular song, it would be possible to produce a performance where the melopoetic imperfections were smoothed over, and a song's melopoetic strengths enhanced. Such performance practices have already been put to practical use by the author.

Irving Berlin

"Play a Simple Melody"

Watch Your Step (1914)

Probably no other composer-lyricist's life in the history of Tin Pan Alley is shrouded in more romantic legend than Irving Berlin's. With over 1500 published songs (and an equal number unpublished), he was revered during his 101-year life as the genius who conquered popular music with even less tuition than George Gershwin. Berlin was a melodic genius who also wrote his own lyrics.

One of Berlin's two main innovations in popular music was the introduction of black-derived ragtime into predominantly white Tin Pan Alley. The other concept he introduced, was the "double melody": two melodies that were initially exposed as separate refrains, but were then played in counterpoint. Although other, more learned, composers including Gershwin tried such devices, none were as successful; only the *tour de force* "Tonight" quintet, and to a lesser extent the "A Boy Like That"/"I Have A Love" duet, from Bernstein's *West Side Story* approach the natural melodic qualities of Berlin's double melodies.

The song to be analysed is the best single example to display Berlin's two innovations.

"Play a Simple Melody" neatly represents Berlin's personal stance in popular music, examining the relationship between the old and the new. Ragtime was the popular music style around this period: deriving from black piano music in the last decade of the nineteenth century but then finding favour among whites. The song's show, *Watch Your Step*, was Berlin's first full score, and the first "syncopated musical" to be heard on Broadway. Twentieth-Century American popular music owes a great deal to the man who made the post-Stephen Foster European style 'indigenous' through the assimilation of ragtime and Broadway.

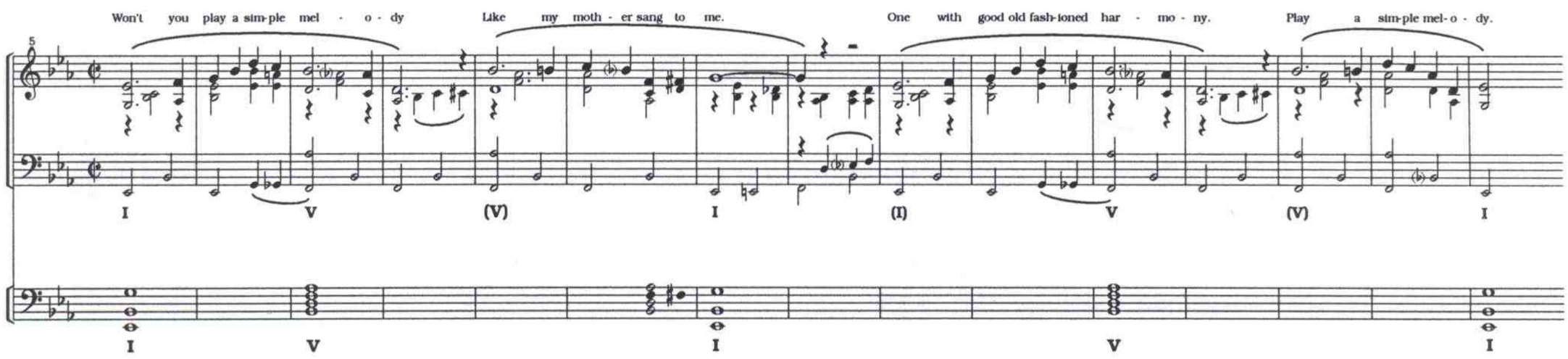
The Music

Taking the sheet music as the score, the song consists of a four-bar introduction, two contrasting sixteen-bar refrains played first individually and then in counterpoint. Both possess identical metres, keys and bass lines, so that the problems of counterpoint are minimised.

The first refrain's accompaniment is reminiscent of marching bands, with their tuba bass lines. Simplicity is the order: the melody is uncomplicated in both rhythm and tonality. Resolutely in E♭ major – not digressing beyond chords **I** and **V** – phrases are discrete tonal journeys, alternating **I-V** and **V-I**. Both melody and harmony thus describe the lyric – it is a "simple melody":

Ex. 1.1

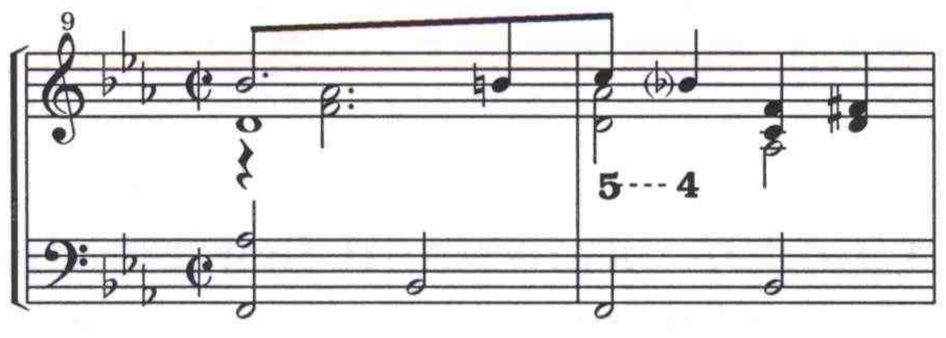
Reduction of the First Refrain of "Play a Simple Melody"



Berlin is pastiching characteristics of the Stephen Foster style associated with the culture of homespun Momma's Apple Pie (this is also the case with the lyric). Most salient are the redundant voice-leadings explicit in the chromatic lines and 5-4 appoggiaturas:

Ex. 1.2

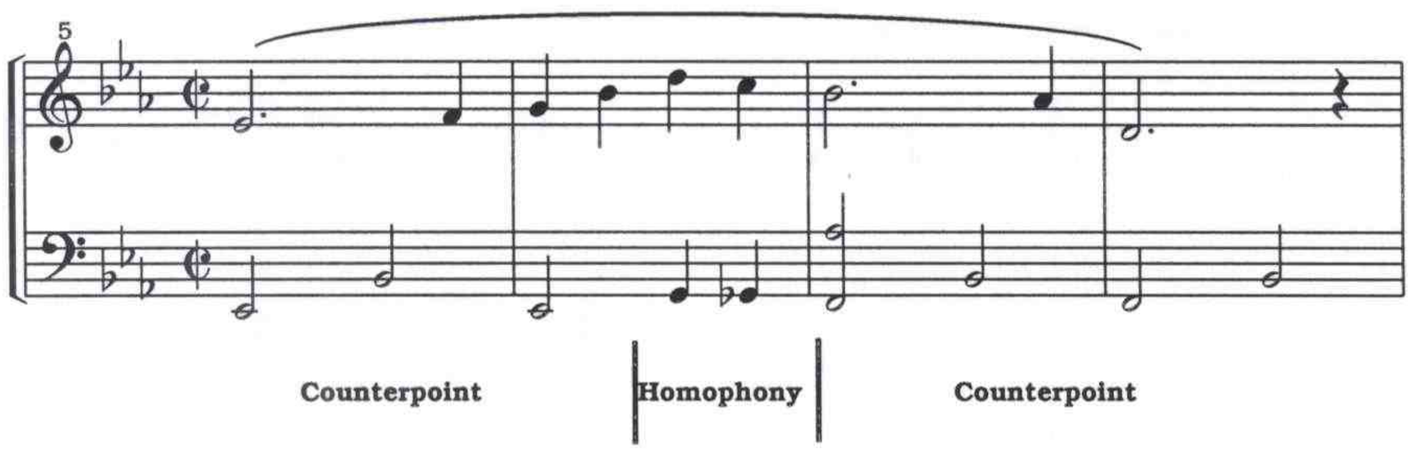
Redundant Chromatic Voice-Leading and 5-4 Appoggiaturas



Another pastiche element is the bass line alternating between being a contrapuntal and a homophonic voice:

Ex. 1.3

Alternating Bass Line Function



The melody is subject to simple developing variation:

Ex. 1.4

Developing Variation in First Refrain



The second refrain, whilst sharing the same harmonic framework, contrasts its predecessor in many aspects. These contrasts are manifested in the musico-dramatic contrast: the change from the old to the new – ragtime.

Ragtime's essence lies in syncopation: the advancing of melodic beats against an established metrical framework. Although Berlin's syncopations in "Play a Simple Melody" are not as sophisticated as those of the style's master Scott Joplin, they succeed in bringing a stock melody to life:

Ex. 1.5

Syncopated Shifted Beats in the Second Refrain



The developing variation of the second refrain is more sophisticated than the first:

Ex. 1.6

Developing Variation in the Second Refrain



Unusually for Berlin's songs of this period, the developing variation technique is very lucid, each phrase most closely related to its neighbours. Due to the **ABAC** form, phrases 7 to 9 above are identical to 2 to 4; thus the metamorphosis of the motive completes a double circle.

Although necessarily sharing the same harmonic rhythm, the first and second refrains differ in their musical event rhythm. Whereas the phrase length in the first refrain is an indivisible four bars, a hierarchy exists in the second refrain; four-bar phrases made up of groups of one or two bars.

The counterpoint produced when the two refrains are superimposed is of a stylised form perfectly suited to the musico-dramatic situation of the old versus the new. Thus the two parts have very individual identities, not drawing on each other's material.

Analysing contrapuntally, with the term used in the widest possible sense, there is a great deal of interplay between the two voices:

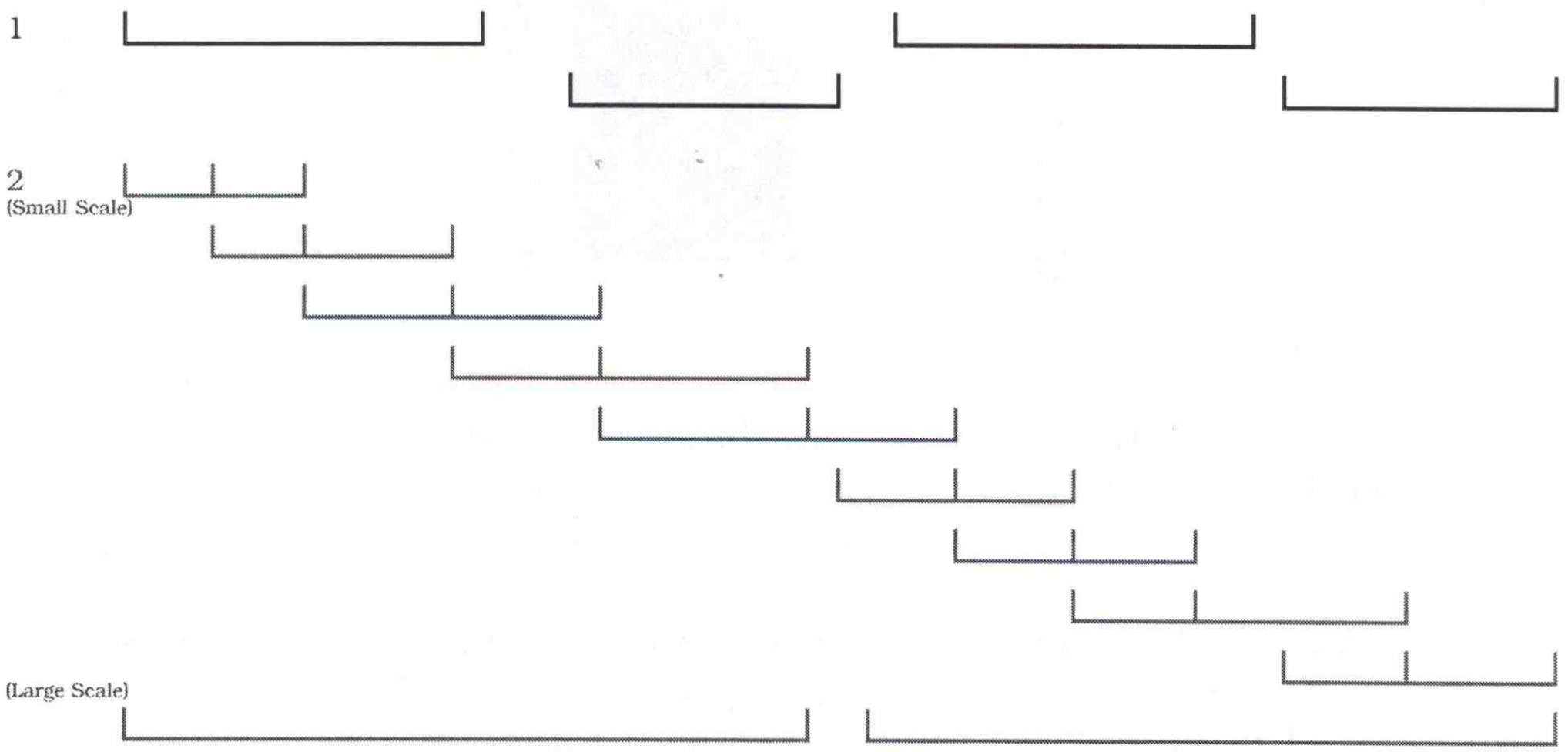
Ex. 1.7

Interplay Between the Contrapuntal Voices



Phrase Lengths:

Musical Development:

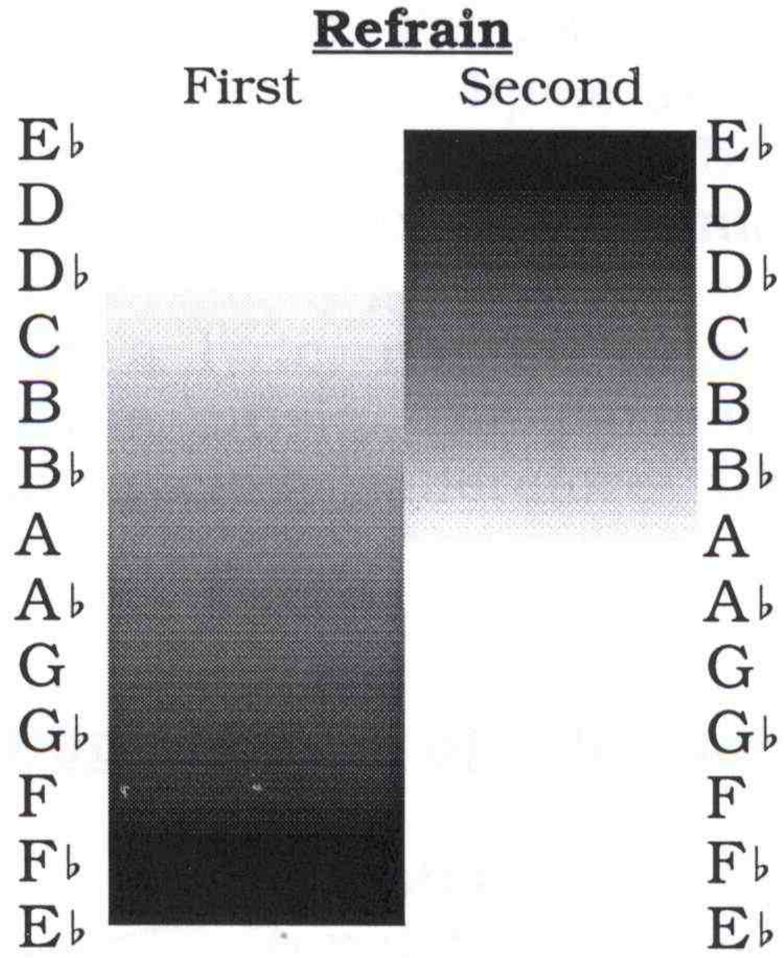


Good counterpoint is achieved through the overlapping of phrase entries. The significance of this stretches beyond classical pedigree, because the ragtime refrain always preempts: going against the regular four-bar undercurrent of the other voice, creating a large-scale syncopation.

Tessitura (aside from possible male/female contrasts) also provides good counterpoint by separating the melodies most of the time, yet being close enough that the two may occasionally swop over. The range of the ragtime voice descends a fifth from the upper tonic, whereas the 'simple' voice ascends a seventh from the lower tonic:

Ex. 1.8

Interlocking Tessituras of the Refrains



By virtue of its quaver-note style, the ragtime section runs at twice the speed of the simple melody – helping to segregate the two streams in cognition. That one melody contains syncopated rhythm whilst the other does not is also significant to the counterpoint.

Aside from occasional parallel fifths and open octave progressions, the counterpoint in this song complies with all the rules of classical counterpoint[1]. This does not mean that such rules should be taken as the guide against which all Broadway counterpoint should be judged. In this instance, the few parallels and open octaves do not detract from the overall motivation of counterpoint: that of maximum cognitive stream segregation. Applying this more global aim, the counterpoint exhibited in the song is exemplary.

The Lyric

Won't you play a simple melody
Like my mother sang to me
One with good old fashioned harmony.
Play a simple melody.

The sentiment of this lyric is straightforward: childhood is associated with simplicity, simplicity with melody and harmony. The reference to the requested latter being "old fashioned" is double-edged. Taken literally, the harmony could be 'good – and in the traditional fashion'. It could also be interpreted as a jibe against new music, with "old fashioned" equating to "good", and 'new' thus meaning 'not so good'.

[1] It should be noted that Berlin never had a classical training, nor to the best of our biographical knowledge did he privately study such disciplines.