

ON WRITING MUSIC FOR THE THEATRE

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MUSIC is among other things theatre. It has elements—we call them melody, harmony, tempo, rhythm, color and so on—which are projected towards an audience in time-units for the purpose of immediate reaction, which with luck becomes a reliable, even permanent reaction,—and that we call immortality. I am aware there is a school which still pleads for the reality of the printed page as against the actual sound. But music was meant to be performed; the musical act is a complete one only at the moment of performance, with the functions of composer, performer and listener in acute and interlocking play. Reading a score can give pleasure, of course; to claim for it the same solid experience one gets on reading a book is, one, confused analogy and, two, arrant snobbery.

There is a difference between the kind of music which is its own theatre—concert music, I mean, where the projection needs only the performance of the music—and the kind of music known as theatre-music, which works in conjunction with other theatrical elements towards a complete projection. On the subject of this second music, theatre-music, the survey is big, and the space here is short. Cataloguing is probably the only solution.

The problem can be broken down to the relation of music to words and of music to action. There is also music and setting, costume, *mise-en-scène*; and finally the nature of theatre, the “breath” of theatre, to use a vague but perhaps communicable expression.

Words. There are arias, songs, recitative, dialogue to incidental music. This must necessarily bring in the situation of opera in English, and I wish it didn't have to. The most recent examples in America I have come across are discouraging. Let me talk about the words themselves first, not the music written to them.

In the aria line, I should like to quote from Mr. Louis Gruenberg's new radio opera, *Green Mansions*, designed with some fancy theories for Columbia's commission. Here are some nuggets:

"Do not melt into the leafage! . . ."

"Your melody penetrates the innermost recesses of my heart! . . ."

"Water—how elusive!" (The chance, here, you see, for some radiogenic impressionisms. When a composer—Mr. Gruenberg is his own librettist—tells you his music is going to be elusive, you can only sit back and find it elusive. Macleish did something like this in his radio-play, *The Fall of the City*, when after the Fascist leader's oration, he had the announcer say, "A great speech!" I did it myself in the radio-song-play *I've Got the Tune*; my chief character, a composer, says "the finest tune I ever wrote!" We should all have our fingers smacked.) Here are a couple more from Gruenberg:

"You beautiful thing of the wood—flower! bud! butterfly!"

"O, do not touch her!—she is not wicked!—she is just a simple girl!—do not harm her!—leave her!—let her live!" (the tenor here mounted to his big moment.)

I don't want to be captious about Gruenberg's libretto. I only feel that it is pretentious, unsingable, risible. I think I know what he was trying to do, and it was a brave thing. But the exalted heroism of grand opera is not for our twentieth-century American ears. Or if it is, then the solver of the problem is still in the wings.

Edwin Denby has made a book to Aaron Copland's school opera *The Second Hurricane*, which is often effective. But when he says:

"I wish I had a car
And just could drive away
I wish I weren't so far,
And didn't have to stay."

he is verging on the perilous. That kind of simplicity is often on the precious side, the over-simple Steinish cherishing of one-syllable words—tasting them over and over as a somewhat perverse gourmet might excessively relish rye-bread-and-butter. But most of Denby's lyrics are more natural, and they belong to song-style

rather than aria-style, which I find a good sign. The Broadway boys, of course—Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, Ira Gershwin—have caught wonderful slices of colloquial talk into neat and racy rhyme-schemes. Occasionally their danger is sentimentalizing a sophisticated mood, as for example Porter in *I've Got You Under My Skin*, where one endless line seemed to sound like "I told myself time and again, still and all, all through the night, night and day, both of us were quite aware this affair wouldn't go so well."

I don't feel there is any difference in the quality of a theatre-song as compared to a concert song. I have heard the former, being "plugged," need only be "pluggable," while the latter can take its time, make its points more musically; in other words, don't be too good a composer, and you may write a successful theatre song. It doesn't make sense to me. The good theatre songs of the past seem to have lasted, the poor concert songs seem to have died; and Time and Tarnish go their own sweet way, plucking off the cheaper products without regard to category.



Music and Action. Here some sharp divisions can be made. Any movie you can think of will do as an example of the music which fits in as background. "Fits in" is maybe not the word. I have heard some pretty strange conjunctions. In the movie *Dead End*, the only music required was a beginning-and-end piece which was to follow New York's skyline as it focussed down to a tenement house and back again. The music, to fit, should have been tart, brash, callous, any ordinary student would have known that. Instead we got some of Alfred Newman's famous heart-throbbing, distilled Tschaiakowsky—the "soaring," the lamenting strings and all. A good piece of "harmony background" music is Honegger's wedding scene to *Mayerling*. Here not only the fact of ceremonious ritual came over through the music and by means of the superimposed tolling bell, but also the special ironies of special individuals and their attitude toward the marriage.

Music isn't always background. Sometimes it comes down front for a closeup, and takes over, as when it gets written into the plot. The *Fascist March* which opens the Mercury production of *Julius Caesar* is a case in point. Less an overture than an initial

statement of theme, I had it cut off abruptly at Caesar's first words "Bid every noise be still!" and one thinks immediately back to it as the theatre pivot up to that point. The music which is made for dance (I mean theatre- and so-called "concert"-dance, now, not ball-room dancing) often becomes foreground, with the action itself as a sort of accompaniment.

Nor is "incidental" music always harmonious with the action. One of the most beautiful effects I have ever found is the moment in the film *Kühle Wampe*, with music by Eisler, when the workers discover their houses destroyed, are sunk in an abyss of dejection. From somewhere comes music—a street-march—steady, vigorous, and with a certain fury in it; and we see the faces of the workers change, grow stubborn, militant, they draw energy and courage out of the music, they drain the music and strength comes into their faces. Music combats the scene, and pulls everything with it. Here is another possible scene, for the stage: a black torch singer sings the *St. Louis Blues* in a Mississippi honky-tonk; great warmth, ease, richness of sound. The revolving stage moves, we find ourselves outside the cafe in the dark night, we witness a murder committed; the music has "dollyed" off,* we can still see the singer waving her arms, the blues song is faint and blurred, but still full of things which counterpoint the taut silent melodrama taking place before us. Enforcing an attitude is one thing; combating the same is another; yet both make for good theatre-music; and the problem then becomes one of balance.

In *The Cradle Will Rock* I wrote a song called *The Nickel Under the Foot*. It was supposed to have a kind of tender cynicism, stating without rancor that in this our world, everything depends on the "nickel under your foot." At one point in the action I introduced the song sung down front as an accompaniment to what was ostensibly a friendly conversation. Actually a scene of venal and unsavory corruption was going on. You got that finally from the conversation itself; but you got it first from the juxtaposition of the song with the conversation. This type can be called counterpoint-foreground.

There are other devices: speech passing to song, words underpinned by music passing to action, with the music carrying on; the device of silence when an action or phrase wants sudden and star-

*A dolly is the car which carries a moving camera.

ting relief (the resumption of music is always a cue for a curious and overwhelming release, one commences to breathe again). There is the plot-song, a hybrid thing, neither good song-in-itself nor good Tin Pan Alley, yet excellent theatre. In it the usual verse-and-chorus pattern is hemmed in by the subject-matter, and a complete episode is exposed within its supposedly rigid confines; Eisler's *Song of Supply and Demand* from *Massnahme* and Weill's *Seeraüber Jenny* from *Dreigroschenoper* are splendid plot-songs.



Can one make general theories about theatre music, how and when it should be used, what it has to do with the nature of theatre itself (the "breath" of theatre I spoke about)? I used to think so. When I started to write the *Cradle* I had a whole and beautiful theory lined up about it. Music was to be used for those sections which were predominantly lyric, satirical, and dramatic. My theories got kicked headlong as soon as I started to write; it became clear to me that the theatre is so elusive an animal that each situation demands its own solution. And so, in a particularly dramatic spot, I found the music simply had to stop. I also found that certain pieces of ordinary plot-exposition could be handled very well by music (*The Freedom of the Press* is a plot-song). I also noticed you could say in a song what would ordinarily take pages of dialogue; and that you could expand and deepen, too, by means of music. In short, music in the theatre is a powerful, an almost immorally potent weapon. It will do things you would never dream of; it can be fantastically perfect for one scene; it can louse up another scene to an extent which is unbelievable. There is only one rule I know; follow your theatre instinct. You discover you've got it very much in the way you first discovered you were a composer. You may be wrong on both counts; but your inner conviction is all you've got.