Common Sense:
Text and Context in Song Analysis

Gabe C. Alfieri

> *Certainly there are few more stringent verse forms in poetry than the sonnet, and yet the greatest poets of all time have woven undying beauty within its small and limited frame. A composer has just as much opportunity for exhibiting his talent and genius in popular songs as in more serious music.*[1]
>
> —Silver and Bruce, *How to Write and Sell a Song Hit* (1939)

Analyzing song is a subtle business. While any song may reasonably be judged by how well it conveys its text, beyond that, functions and esthetic aims diverge, and methods of analysis and judgment must necessarily be contextual and contingent.[2] It would be as

[1] Abner Silver and Robert Bruce, *How to Write and Sell a Song Hit* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1939), 2; quoted in Theodor W. Adorno and George Simpson, "On Popular Music" (1941), in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music,* ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 438.

[2] Donald Ivey makes a similar argument in his comparison of German art song from various eras, e.g. Schubert and Wolf. Donald Ivey, *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Styles* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), 254-56.

meaningless to evaluate a song of Paul Bowles and a song of Milton Babbitt with the same analytic or critical tools, or the same esthetic expectations, as it would be to compare either to Kern or Sondheim. Even judging Kern and Sondheim by the same standards might not serve an analyst's best ends, just as Bernstein's art song cannot be understood by the same rubric as his theater song: what matters to a meaningful understanding of one genre may be meaningless to another.

To complicate matters, art song composers since early in the twentieth century have been borrowing from jazz, blues, cabaret, Broadway, and other more or less popular idioms, while denizens of more popular-music realms produce works that can only be call art song (e.g. Previn's *Honey and Rue*). Such hybridity and "crossover" necessarily creates its own problems for the analyst, especially with regard to genre definition and esthetic expectations. Nevertheless, since the goal of the present essay is to evaluate analytic methods and esthetic judgments as they apply to the study of modern art song in English and that large and loose collection of popular songs and styles known as the Great American Songbook, it might be good to begin by attempting to clarify some parameters.[3]

The text of an art song usually exists as an independent entity—a poem, part of a play, a piece of prose—before inspiring a composer to set it, at which point the music is essentially superimposed and, quite often, the poem changed in some fundamental way in the process

[3] Though largely concerned with popular musics of the later-20th and the present century, David Brackett's article "(In Search of) Musical Meaning: Genres, Categories and Crossover," is both an excellent introduction to the process and necessity of genre definitions, and an overview of current scholarship on the subject. David Brackett, "(In Search of) Musical Meaning: Genres, Categories and Crossover," in *Popular Music Studies,* ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus (London: Arnold, 2002), 65-83. Simon Frith defines three "sources of evaluative discourse" in music: classical, folk, and popular; see Frith, "What Is Good Music?" *Canadian Universities Music Review* 10/2 (1990): 97-101. (http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/docview/1361968/fulltext/1399C06832A7EA5B994/7?accountid=9676, accessed October 5, 2012).

(through repetition, etc.). Even a text that begins its life as *poesia per musica*—as, for example, so much early English lyric poetry—may still have a viable existence as literature, before and after its musical appropriation. Thus, it is with the text that traditional forms of art song analysis typically begin: musical elements are explicated as they relate to, interact with, articulate or obscure various aspects of that text.

An autonomous literary source, then, along with the existence of a definitive written score, may be a good place to begin defining art song for the purposes of the present essay. Such a definition can be further refined through contextualization. If, for example, we add that art song is, by and large, a repertoire composed primarily for the enjoyment of certain strata of society (the well-educated middle-to-upper classes), intended to be performed by musicians with a certain degree and type of training, within a relatively narrow range of stylistic and performance conventions, then we begin to approach a workable definition. Workable, in the present context, because it enables meaningful comparisons with that other genre under consideration here and also in need of some clarification, the popular song—specifically, the works of the Great American Songbook.

A great deal of thought and ink has been expended on the task of defining the 'popular' in art, especially as it stands in opposition to the 'serious' or 'sophisticated'—or even to true art itself. Rachel Rubin and Jeff Melnick have noted the investment of the gatekeepers of American "high" culture in the early and mid-twentieth century in defining the popular in art, while at the same time so often seeming to scorn it.[4] Schoenberg wrote that "If it is art it is not for all, and if

[4] Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick, *American Popular Music* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 2.

it is for all, it is not art." [5] Adorno defined popular music as total standardization, from the largest structure to the smallest detail, in contrast to "serious music," which he characterizes as deriving "its musical sense from the concrete totality of the piece which, in turn, consists of the life relationship of the details and never of a mere enforcement of a musical scheme."[6] In other words, something tellingly like nineteenth-century organicism. Popular music, he says, "divests the listener of his spontaneity and promotes conditioned reflexes." He overtly politicized his theory by suggesting that the standardization inherent in popular music produces "a system of response mechanisms wholly antagonistic to the ideal of individuality in a free, liberal society."[7] Milton Babbitt hinted at a partial definition of popular in opposition to serious music by degree of determinacy: "A popular song," he writes, "is only very partially determined, since it would appear to retain its germane characteristics under considerable alteration of register, rhythmic texture, dynamics, harmonic structure, timbre, and other qualities."[8] This, of course, relates directly to issues of performance and even textual authority, some of which are discussed below. Both Babbitt and Adorno located in the popular as it pertains to the production of art the political agenda of totalitarianism. For Babbitt, artistic autonomy that resisted totalizing

[5] Arnold Schoenberg, "New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea" (1946), in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg,* ed. Leonard Stein (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 124.

[6] Adorno, "On Popular Music," 439. All of Adorno's examples in the essay considered here are instrumental works by Beethoven and Brahms.

[7] Ibid., 442.

[8] Milton Babbitt, "Who Cares if You Listen?" *High Fidelity* 8 (Feb. 1958): 39, reprinted in *Composers on Modern Musical Culture: An Anthology of Readings on Twentieth-Century Music,* ed. Bryan R. Simms (New York: Schirmer, 1999), 155. It never hurts to reiterate that Babbitt was not responsible for the title under which this article was published. He had an expressed affection for the early repertoire of the Great American Songbook, and evidently attempted to write a musical early in his career. Stephen Sondheim, perhaps the last composer deserving of a significant place in the Great American Songbook, was, of course, a student of Babbitt. See Milton Babbitt, "'All the Things They Are': Comments on Kern" (1985), in *The Collected Essays of Milton Babbitt,* ed. Stephen Peles, Stephen Dembski, et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 395-98.

populism was vital to the very survival of "serious" music.[9] Though such notions have mostly been discredited, they offer an intriguing window onto the modernist landscape within which much of the work addressed in the present essay was produced and first received.

From the other side, so to speak, the side of popular music, the quote given at the beginning of this essay indicates a certain frame of mind at work during the period when so much of the Songbook was created: the reference to the sonnet, that most rigorous and lofty of lyric forms, coupled with the authors' use of the phrase "more serious music," indicates how at least some popular-song composers regarded their art back then: somewhat defensively, in this case, but very much in relation to a classical aesthetic.[10]

Peter van der Merwe defines the language of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century popular song as fundamentally derived from the reciprocal interaction between the classical products of the concert hall and the middle-class salon parlor (itself the locus of a complex of musical influences), an interaction that resulted in that peculiar product of the Industrial and Modern ages, "music commercially produced for a mass audience."[11] In 2004, the journal *Popular Music* ran a virtual symposium on the validity of the term *popular* in musicology, which necessarily produced a great many efforts to define the term. While some participants—all well-respected popular music specialists—suggested dismantling the concept

[9] Milton Babbitt, "The Unlikely Survival of Serious Music," in *Words About Music*, ed. Stephen Dembski and Joseph M. Straus (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 163-183. See also Martin Brody, "'Music for the Masses': Milton Babbitt's Cold War Music Theory," *The Musical Quarterly* 77/2 (Summer 1993): 161-192.

[10] The old, probably apocryphal, story comes to mind in which Gershwin asks Ravel for composition lessons and Ravel suggests that he himself should be the student, based upon Gershwin's income. Sometimes the story includes Schoenberg instead of Ravel, which seems even less probable.

[11] Peter van der Merwe, *Origins of the Popular Style: The Antecedents of Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 2-3, 18-20. If van der Merwe's position is accepted, then the elements drawn from African-American culture, including jazz, are necessarily viewed as secondary.

altogether, most admitted a continued usefulness of the term (as, indeed, the present essay does, within limits). Virtually all participants share the opinion that music that is truly popular must be commoditized: mass produced and mass marketed. Charles Hamm's definition of popular song applies particularly well to the Great American Songbook:

> Written for, and most often performed by, a single voice or a small group of singers, accompanied by either a single chord-playing instrument or some sort of band, ensemble, or small orchestra; usually first performed and popularized in some form of secular stage entertainment, and afterward consumed (performed or listened to) in the home; composed and marketed with the goal of financial gain; designed to be performed by and listened to by persons of limited training and ability; and produced and disseminated in physical form—as sheet music in its early history, and in various forms of mechanical reproduction in the twentieth century.[12]

* * *

For popular song, where words and music are usually conceived more or less together, and where only rarely does a lyric have a life without its setting, text analysis will not as often yield up the trove of analytic treasure that an art song's poem might. As suggested at the beginning of this essay, we may judge *any* song by how well it conveys its texts. *But the text itself may not weigh equally in analysis,* especially when more traditional methods are used, such as the attempt to locate direct generative links of substantial interpretive import between specific musical and textual elements. To give just a few examples, Hammerstein's text for the song "All the Things You Are to Me" seems to offer little in the way of concrete images, ideas, or even formal traits to account for Kern's daring harmonies and long-breathed melody; analysis could more profitably start elsewhere—with harmony or context, for example. The first stanza of Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine" gives a few obvious clues to the nature of the

[12] Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979), xvii.

music— the beguine rhythm, the swaying palm trees—but, otherwise, music does not seem strongly beholden to text in any very specific way. In analyzing the relationship between text and music in popular song, David Jenness and Don Velsey ask a series of questions reciprocating between music and text: "Given *this* musical move, is it plausible to say precisely *that* in the lyric? Does *this* harmonic event make *that* phrase semantically clear? Does this *key word* coincide with a crucial *musical moment*?" (italics in original).[13] Because of the nature of the relationship between music and text in popular song, the questions are necessarily reflexive with neither element clearly in a position of priority, tending to focus on highly localized musico-poetic events and the general aptness and clarity of the interaction.[14]

None of this is intended to diminish the lyricist's art in the best of the Songbook; who can deny that it is the words of Porter's "You're the Tops" or "I Get a Kick Out of You," or of Rodgers & Hart's "I Wish I Were in Love Again," that really drive the song and delight the hearer. But the specific kind of intimately generative union between text and music that one looks for in art song simply does not work—or matter—in a great deal of popular song. As an example of this union in art song, take the subtly Wagnerian harmonies in Roger Quilter's "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal"—complete with Tristan chord at m. 17—which resonate in a highly suggestive manner against the exotic Romanticism of the love-sleep-death complex in Tennyson's poem, and point toward several broader historical trends and avenues of

[13] David Jenness and Don Velsey, *Classic American Popular Song: The Second Half of the Century, 1950-2000* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xv.

[14] This is not to say that popular song lyrics have not been the subject of study, especially by literary and theater scholars, e.g. Philip Furia, *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Thomas S. Hischak, *Word Crazy: Broadway Lyricists from Cohan to Sondheim* (New York: Praeger, 1991); and Ulf Lindberg, "Popular Modernism? The 'Urban' Style of Interwar Tin Pan Alley," *Popular Music,* 22/3 (Oct. 2003): 283-98.

evaluation. Or the bitonal section in the second stanza of Britten's "The Ash Grove" (voice and piano left hand in F major, piano right hand in D-flat major), so specifically expressing the cognitive dissonance, inherent in the text (albeit folk poetry), between the poet and his surroundings; after a virtual suspension of tonality through which the poet wanders in search of his love, the final couplet returns clearly to the home key of F major and the acceptance of loss.[15] In both cases, it is the text of the art song that generates and explains the musical event.

Traditional positivistic analyses of the elements of a song score are generally more useful when applied to art song than popular song for two reasons: 1) the score as definitive text does not always exist for the latter as it does for the former; 2) the methods and aims of traditional formal analysis developed around that very tradition of Western classical music of which the body of art song in question here is largely a part, or out of which it evolved, even in its most avant-garde incarnations.[16] That tradition allows of a much higher degree of experimentation and complexity than that of the Songbook and other popular genres. Britten's "Ash Grove," described above, is just a mild example of the sort of complexity that offers up especially meaningful results using traditional analytic methods—much more so than can usually be expected of popular song—and many much more complex examples might be

[15] The question of folk song settings as art songs is potentially problematic but it is safe to say that Britten's settings, by and large, do conform to the definition of art song outlined above.

[16] See, for example, the analyses in Stephen Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song,* 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); "Chapter VI: Benjamin Britten's Donne Sonnets—The Meaning Behind the Form," in Vicki Pierce Stroeher, "Form and Meaning in Benjamin Britten's Sonnet Cycles" (PhD Diss., University of North Texas, 1994), 373-549; Timothy A. Johnson, "Chromatic Quotations of Diatonic Tunes in Songs of Charles Ives," *Music Theory Spectrum* 18/2 (Autumn 1996): 236-261; and Wilfred Mellers, "Britten's 'Lyrics and Ballads of Thomas Hardy': Sad Tales for Winter," *The Musical Times,* 142/187 (Winter 2001): 27-33. This last is an especially beautiful example of a strictly prose (no musical figures) analysis of song music and text in tandem. It is interesting to note that none of the authors of these "traditional" analyses of art song make any attempt to justify their work's existence the way that so many popular song scholars of both kinds (traditional analytic and newer contextual types) seem compelled to do.

added. In fact, such complexity quite often requires formal explanation before any contingent or contextual analysis can meaningfully begin.

Some aspects of traditional analysis can, however, be productively applied to popular song analysis as well: the description of a melody, for example, and its relationship to both the text and other musical elements can, depending upon the work, be as meaningful (or meaningless) for a popular song as for an art song. Where applicable, form may be described in either category with the traditional letters (A, A', B, etc.), or terms (open, closed, arch, and so forth). The form of an art song often follows or is derived from that of the poem; where it deviates, the differences are of particular interest. In popular song of the era and genre under consideration here, form tends to be highly regular (often a chorus of $A_8A_8B_8A_8$, or something relatively close to it, frequently preceded by a verse), so that analysis of form yields its most revealing insights in the relationships among formal units, and in deviations from the norms. Likewise with functional harmonic analysis: in the popular genre, functional tertian harmony is almost exclusively the norm and chord-function analysis is only really telling at those points where the expected functional progression is subverted.[17]

The best-known examples of traditional theoretical analysis rigorously applied to works from the Great American Songbook are probably those of Allen Forte.[18] Richard Middleton, in his review of Forte's *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era 1924-1950,* has shown the

[17] For an excellent discussion of the technical characteristics of "classic popular" song form (e.g. The Great American Songbook), see Jenness and Velsey, *Classic American Popular Song,* 3-44.

[18] Such as Allan Forte, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era 1924-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 55-56; "Secrets of Melody: Line and Design in the Songs of Cole Porter," *Musical Quarterly* 77/4 (Winter 1993): 607-47; and *Listening to Classic American Popular Songs* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001). See also David Carson Berry, "Dynamic Introductions: The Affective Role of Melodic Ascent and Other Linear Devices in Selected Song Verses of Irving Berlin," *Intégral* 13 (1999): 1-62.

limits of Forte's attempt and others like it.[19] Middleton views with suspicion the "canon formation" inherent in Forte's choice of repertoire, which Forte himself calls "the American 'Lieder' of a particularly rich period in popular music"—a description that demands the question of how Forte's choices compare in 'Lieder- ness' to, say, the songs of Barber or Griffes or Bacon from the same period (a question, not surprisingly, left unanswered).[20] Furthermore, Middleton suspects that Forte's genre has been defined by his method; that is to say, his subjects are those that lend themselves most productively to his particular brand of "neo-Shenkarian" analysis. Finally, Middleton points out that certain aspects of Forte's analyses, and his whole agenda of demonstrating long-range unity, often depend upon the reification of a score that may not really exist as such.[21]

In contrast, Middleton suggests an analytic method that exchanges Forte's synthesizing formalism, with its emphasis on structural coherence as quality indicator (inherited from Schenker, Schoenberg, Babbitt, and others), for a dialogic process through which "interactive relationships, operative at the level of both style and individual song, between features and processes of differing provenance and with differing orientations" are explored.[22] He writes that

> "the music" is a discursive construct whose meaning, far from being self-evident, varies in different cultural formations [. . .] "dialogue" can take place on many

[19] Richard Middleton, "Pop Goes Old Theory," review of *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era 1924-1950,* by Allen Forte, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 122/2 (1997): 303-320.

[20] Forte himself poses a similar question at the end of his book, without answering it; see Forte, *The American Popular Ballad,* 3, 334. In the realm of classical music, Forte's brand of analysis is not frequently involved with song, for many reasons outside the scope of this essay.

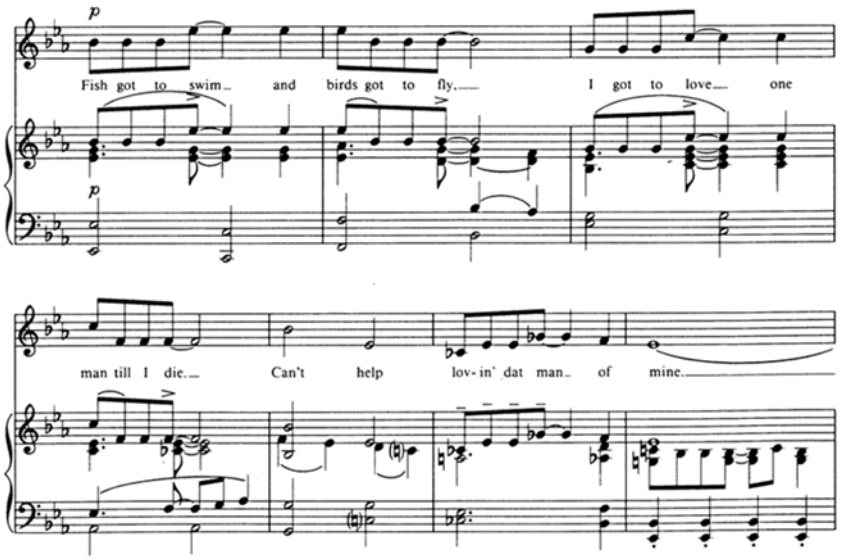
[21] Middleton, "Pop Goes Old Theory," 313.

[22] Ibid., 311-12.

> levels: for instance, between I-V and I-IV harmonic orientations; between [scale degree] 1 and 6 tonal poles (and between diatonic and pentatonic); between hierarchic rhythmic structures and additive "syncopation"; between chromatic notes interpreted as alterations and chromatic notes interpreted as bluesy and integral; between (at a more global level) "white" and "black". Arguably, such dialogues are characteristic of all musical styles.[23]

Middleton uses the example of the "hook" at the beginning of the chorus of Kern's "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" (Ex. 1). Forte interprets it as a "chromatic shift [. . .] a beautiful intensification of the [opening], one that transcends the simple borrowing from the blues idiom," all in the context of a synthesis of operetta and African-American musical styles. Middleton, on the other hand, hears the *contrast*—the "shock"—as more meaningful, the dialogue between the two styles as more telling than their synthesis. Clearly, both are interesting and informative ways of hearing the musical event, though Middleton's notion of discourse, of dialogue between

Example 1. Hammerstein & Kern, "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," chorus, mm. 1-7 (T.B. Harms Co., 1927).



elements within a work of art, holds a great deal of appeal, especially if one considers song

[23] Ibid.

itself to be an inherently dramatic (dialogic) form.[24]

Middleton's reservations notwithstanding, Forte's analyses of those aspects of a song and its interpretation that can reasonably be ascribed to the agency of the composer, such as the essential harmonic components and the important melodic material of the singing line, can prove an enlightening point of departure toward deeper, contextualized understanding of these works. Regarding the elements of popular song that tend to vary from performance to performance, or the fact that certain aspects of the musical language (such as voice leading of inner parts in a song's accompaniment) can increase or diminish in importance based upon the theory of historical development assumed by the analyst, Forte say little.[25]

Alex Wilder, whose 1972 *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* in many ways first focused the scholarly consideration of the Great American Songbook that would follow, laid out his criteria for the selections included in his book, which he limits to works in which "the singing line [exhibits] the elements of intensity, unexpectedness, originality, sinuosity of phrase, clarity, naturalness, control, unclutteredness, sophistication, and honest sentiment."[26] Though such terms may seem too subjective for rigorous musicology, the list is insightful—especially from someone so experienced in the repertoire—and something like it may be used, selectively and with due caution, in the critical evaluation of both the art song and popular song repertoires, especially if one removes Wilder's limitation to the singing line

[24] Middleton's "shock" is foreshadowed, and potentially mitigated, by the verse of this song which is replete with "chromatic shifts" and blues colorings.

[25] Ibid., 313.

[26] Alec Wilder, with James T. Maher, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 355.

and seeks the various characteristics he mentions, and their mechanisms (or absence), in other essential musical elements too, ones that tend to be relatively well "determined," to use Babbitt's term, such as harmony, and form. Even art song can be clear, controlled, and uncluttered!

While contextual analyses can reveal a great deal about both types of song, it becomes imperative to any broadly meaningful understanding of popular song. This is because popular song serves functions that could not be effectively served by the sorts of complexities—musical, poetic, and musico-poetic—valued in art song. Even so-called positivistic analysis is necessarily contextualizing insofar as it can position a work within or without a certain tradition and function.

Phillip Tagg has formulated a concise scheme for analyzing meaning in popular music: he begins by asking himself "Why and how does who communicate what to whom and with what effect?"[27] Simple and yet full of possibilities (possibilities, I might add, that could enhance the analysis of art song as well). The "why" speaks to the work's function; the "how," to the mechanics of the work; "who," of course, can indicate the composer, the performer, and/or the narrative stance assumed by the performer in performance (which necessarily leads back to the "how"); "what" is anything and everything contained in and communicated by the "how"; "to whom" may be the audience, the performer, or the analyst engaging with the work; and "with what effect" speaks to the many facets of performance and reception. Such a broadly contextual concept of analysis can be applied effectively to virtually every element of music as

[27] Philip Tagg, "Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method, and Practice," in *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music,* ed. Richard Middleton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 74.

understood by traditional musicology, in both popular and art song: form, tonality/modality, melody, rhythm, harmony, meter, performance practice, and more. Sociologist Keith Negus provides another aphoristic yet convincing justification for contextual analysis when he writes that "music is created, circulated, recognized and responded to according to a range of conceptual assumptions and analytical activities that are grounded in quite particular social relationships, political processes and cultural activities."[28] Rich soil for the analyst to dig in.

Virtually every work of art (or work of any kind, really) has a function, upon the fulfillment of which to some extent must depend its success.[29] The primary function of any song is to communicate its text in some way that the text alone cannot accomplish (at least in the judgment of the composer). Songs may have secondary, social functions, too: a lullaby is meant to bring sleep, a love song to convey a specific sentiment or emotion, a work song to facilitate work, a devotional song to inspire, and so forth. Many songs in the Songbook, for example, were originally danced to, either in the theater or in the dance hall. But such functions can change over time, and the function a song might have originally served may have little or no bearing upon an esthetic judgment of that song once it has established itself as having a robust life divorced from its original function—as is the case with many of the songs in the Songbook.[30] For example, the song "Too Darn Hot" originally served as a hip, contemporary, and jazzy way to ease into Act II of Porter's *Kiss Me Kate,* leading into a "novelty" dance number that

[28] Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 4.

[29] See Ivey, *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Styles*, 254-56.

[30] Hamm suggests that popular songs can and did change genres (and, by extension, possibly their functions). Charles Hamm, "Genre, Performance and Ideology in the Early Songs of Irving Berlin," *Popular Music* 13/2 (May 1994): 145.

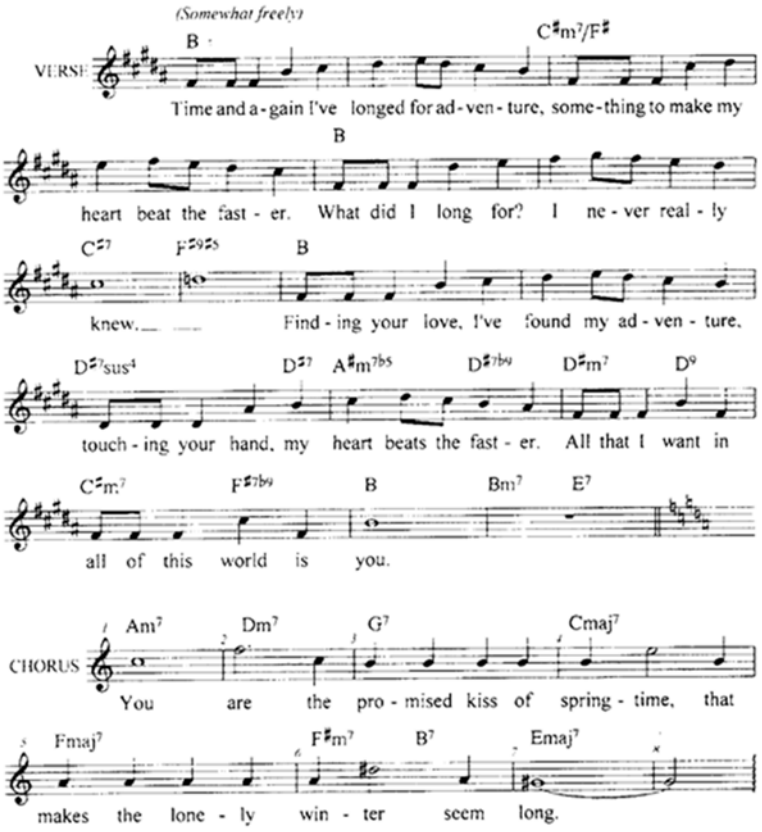
heightens the on-stage/back-stage metadramatic premise of the show. In its enduring Great American Songbook incarnation, it is usually interpreted as a semi-comic number presenting a litany of Porter's famous sexual innuendo. An analyst ought to identify a song's function, past and present, and factor that into an evaluation of the work. Of course, many art songs are also stylized versions of functional-type songs (Britten's *Charm of Lullabies,* for example); though displaced from their original generic use to the concert stage, the connection might still be meaningful.

A great many songs in the Songbook come from the theater and begin with a verse, somewhat akin to recitative in opera, that has no real counterpart in art song generally. Useful as a transition from the plain speech of the musical play in which it was originally situated, to the heightened expression of song, the verse often creates meaningful context for the chorus—musically, textually, or both—and its omission can appreciably change the perception of the work. Or, to put it the other way around, its inclusion, in both performance and analysis, can be enlightening. The music Gershwin wrote to his brother's lyrics in the verse of "They Can't Take that Away from Me," is harmonically rich and full of possibilities for the singer. And even though the verse for Arlen's "Over the Rainbow" didn't appear in the film for which the song was originally written, it has become virtually *de rigueur* in performance since then. A complete analysis will take a song's verse into consideration (as do the analyses by both Wilde and Forte mentioned above), especially regarding musical relationships with the chorus and the ways in which the text of the verse may inform the text of the chorus.[31] Quite often, the vantage of the

[31] For an entire study devoted to the verses of songs by Irving Berlin, see Berry, "Dynamic Introductions: The Affective Role of Melodic Ascent and Other Linear Devices in Selected Song Verses of Irving Berlin."

singer vis-à-vis the audience (and any implied third person) is made explicit in the verse. A frequently cited example in the musicological literature is the verse that proceeds Kern's and Hammerstein's "All the Things You Are to Me." Both Wilder and Forte consider it perfunctory; Wilder heard it as if it was conceived separately from the rest of the song.[32] And yet, its rather square, workaday opening sequence, with its stagey eighth-eighth-quarter rhythmic motive and ascending line hinting at a bugle call, might be read as a perfect foil for the luxurious, surprising harmonies of the chorus, and the undulating melody of the first phrase with its long *de*scending line of *a*scending fourths (including one literally inspirational tritone). In fact, the verse itself

Example 2. Hammerstein & Kern, "All the Things You Are," verse and chorus opening (verse originally in G, chorus originally in A-flat; Universal, 1939).



[32] Wilder, 79.

contains some harmonic surprises of its own: for example, the III (D#) chord at m. 11 where one expects another V, foreshadows the more sensual mood of the chorus; and the whole thing not only anticipates the key of the bridge but serves as a sort of prolonged leading tone to the chorus, an effect that is only enhanced by the word "you" rising up a half step upon its repetition, beautifully connecting the end of the verse to the opening of the chorus (Ex. 2).[33]

Even where a popular song's arrangement can be linked directly to the composer, the accompaniment rarely functions at the level of the piano or other instrumental part of classic art song. In a successful art song, the instrumental part is always an important, quite often equal, player in the song's experience. The accompaniment of a popular song may be illustrative, or atmospheric, have some musical relationship to the singing line, rhythmic, motivic, or otherwise, but it is virtually always secondary, supportive to the endeavor of communicating the song's scenario, putting across the text and melody, and featuring the singer's art.

Another way in which methods of analysis and criticism may differ between art song and popular song lies in the realm of performance. While it is common for singers trained in the classical style to venture into the realm of popular song, especially the Great American Songbook (a considerable part of it having been originally conceived for voices with some degree of classical training), it is rare that the attention flows the other way (the two that come immediately to mind are Barbra Streisand's "classical crossover" album and Judy Collins's recording of Landini's *ballata*, "Lasso! di donna," but these are rare exceptions). For better or

[33] See Jenness and Don Velsey, *Classic American Popular Song,* 14. Inscrutably, Forte calls the word repetition "awkward to say the least." Forte, *The American Popular Ballad,* 74.

worse, when classically-trained singers attempt popular music, they rarely change their tone production, timbre, or diction appreciably in reaction to the style of music (mercifully, neither did Streisand or Collins).[34] But, given that popular music must frequently be evaluated via performance, when nothing like an *Urtext* can viably be established,[35] and given the virtual imperative that individual performers individualize their performances of "standards;" given these situations, performances (especially recordings) as "texts" to be read in the process of a song's analysis or critical evaluation play a much more important role in the realm of popular song than that of art song. Some might argue that they actually play the most important role.[36] Which suggests an interesting twist on Adorno's concept of standardization: in the realm of art song, and classical music generally (with certain notable pre-Classical and late-Modernist/Postmodern exceptions), a much higher degree of standardization obtains *in performance,* based upon the presence of an authoritative written text (with all the traditional

[34] Among the notable exceptions was opera singer Eileen Farrell, who was not afraid to do some moderate "belting" (stretching upward of the chest or modal register) when she sang popular songs. Similarly, Renee Flemming, on her recently released rock album, *Dark Hope*, lightens her resonance to a reasonable intensity for pop-style microphone singing (as Farrell did), and performs all songs in keys that keep her comfortably confined to her modal register—with reasonably successful results. For some interesting thoughts on the subject, see Chapter One of Henry Pleasants, *The Great American Popular Singers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974).

In some non-English song traditions, there seems to be a less pronounced difference between the tone qualities and production of singers of classical and popular or folk song—for example, in some recordings of Hugues Cuenod, Pierre Bernac (both French), Carlo Buti (Italian), Angelique Ionatos, and Nena Venetsanou (both Greek).

[35] Regarding the issue of song from the Great American Songbook as written text and *Urtext*, see Wilder, xxvii, Middleton, "Pop Goes Old Theory," 313-14; Berry, "Dynamic Introductions," 2-5; and Matthew Shaftel, "From Inspiration to Archive: Cole Porter's 'Night and Day'," *Journal of Music Theory* 43/2 (Autumn 1999): 315-47. Shaftel and Berry argue for the authorial authority of the original published versions of works by their respective subjects (Porter and Berlin).

[36] The most notable exception to this rule would be recordings of works by the singers for whom they were written or who gave their premières—recordings which often feature the composer at the piano—such as Bernac's recordings of Poulenc, Pears's recordings of Britten, or Panzera's recordings of Fauré.

imperatives that that implies), than in the popular-song arena.[37] Convention dictates that a classical singer stick to the score, by and large—indeed, follow it meticulously; classical musicians are frequently judged by such fidelity to the written score, and how effectively they accomplish the various "feats" laid out therein. When classical performances (including recordings) are the subject of scholarly consideration, performance practice, rather than analysis of the work, tends to be the focus.

On the other hand, popular standards in print are frequently marketed "as performed by," with details of the printed vocal line, accompaniment, as well as tempo and performance-style indications tailored to match a particular performer's interpretation. Even a first edition printing may transmit the work in an arrangement made by someone other than the composer who conceived the song. Very often, as already noted, the song was created for a musical play, which may have involved a conception and context entirely different—musically, dramatically, and analytically—from the abstracted contextual realm of "The Great American Songbook." Variation and improvisation take on a much more important role for the analyst of popular music, as does the whole complex of a song's performance history—including its use as the basis for jazz improvisation, its multiple interpretations and reinterpretations and, where applicable, its career in other media, such as stage, cinema, or television. The whole process, that is, by which works, like those that have found a place in the Great American Songbook, earn their status, so to speak.

* * *

[37] Adorno does, in fact, address the concept of what he calls "pseudo-individualization" in popular music, including performance, the most drastic example of which he locates in jazz improvisation.

Clearly, overlap exists among the methods and techniques of analysis and esthetic judgment that can meaningfully be applied to twentieth-century English-language art song and works of the Great American Songbook. But, insofar as the repertoires are fundamentally different in function, goals of analysis and esthetic judgment must necessarily differ—and thus analytic tools and methods must differ, too.

References

Adorno, Theodor W., and George Simpson. "On Popular Music" (1941). In *Essays on Music,* edited by Richard Leppert, translated by Susan H. Gillespie, 437-69. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

Babbitt, Milton. "The Unlikely Survival of Serious Music." In *Words About Music,* edited by Stephen Dembski and Joseph M. Straus, 163-183. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987.

--------. "Who Cares if You Listen?" *High Fidelity* 8 (Feb. 1958): 38-40. Reprinted in *Composers on Modern Musical Culture: An Anthology of Readings on Twentieth-Century Music*, edited by Bryan R. Simms, 154-59. New York: Schirmer, 1999.

Brackett, David. "(In Search of) Musical Meaning: Genres, Categories and Crossover." In *Popular Music Studies,* edited by David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus, 65-83. London: Arnold, 2002.

Brody, Martin. "'Music for the Masses': Milton Babbitt's Cold War Music Theory." *The Musical Quarterly* 77/2 (Summer 1993): 161-192.

Chew, Geoffrey, et al. "Song." In Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/50647 (accessed October 7, 2012).

Forte, Allan. *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era 1924-1950*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Frith, Simon. "What Is Good Music?" *Canadian Universities Music Review* 10/2 (1990): 92-101. http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/docview/1361968/fulltext/1399C06832A7EA5B994/7?accountid=9676 (accessed October 5, 2012).

Hamm, Charles. "Genre, Performance and Ideology in the Early Songs of Irving Berlin." *Popular Music* 13/2 (May 1994): 143-50.

--------. *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979.

Ivey, Donald. *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Styles*. New York: The Free Press, 1970.

Jenness, David, and Don Velsey. *Classic American Popular Song: The Second Half of the Century, 1950-2000.* New York: Routledge, 2006.

Middleton, Richard. "Pop Goes Old Theory." Review of *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era 1924-1950,* by Allen Forte. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 122/2

(1997): 303-320.

Negus, Keith. *Popular Music in Theory*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996.

Rubin, Rachel, and Jeffrey Melnick. *American Popular Music*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.

Schoenberg, Arnold. "New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea" (1946). In *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg,* edited by Leonard Stein, translated by Leo Black, 113-124. London: Faber & Faber, 1975.

Tagg, Philip. "Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method, and Practice." In *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music,* edited by Richard Middleton, 71-103. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

van der Merwe, Peter. *Origins of the Popular Style: The Antecedents of Twentieth-Century Popular Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

Wilder, Alec, with James T. Maher. *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.