

“Jerome Kern: The Simplicity of Artfulness”

by Stephen Sondheim

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The Land Where the Good Songs Go

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It is dangerous, and perhaps foolhardy, to try to pin down in words the qualities of musical style, since the essence of music is that it is an abstract and therefore highly personal expression. If music could be described in language, there would be no need for it. But in trying to pursue the style of a composer, we may come closer to a common understanding of his art and its meaning. The “style” is the composer’s personality come to fruition; it is what differentiates him from all others, like a face or a way of speaking or a nervous habit. The leading American theater-composers, such as Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, and Cole Porter, had “styles”—their songs are more often than not recognizable immediately as *theirs* and no other composer’s.

For instance, the most striking characteristic of Gershwin’s songs is their harmonic originality and, in the faster ones, their rhythmic drive. In Rodgers’ music, “deceptive simplicity” (in *Time* magazine’s phrase) is the hallmark—sudden surprising shifts of spare block harmonies under essentially diatonic, often repeated-note melodies with occasional unexpected chromatic leaps. The impressive feature of Porter’s songs is their “sophistication”—the frequent use of Latin-American rhythms, the lush chromatic harmony, and the lengthy extensions of standard chorus forms (as in “Night and Day” and “Begin the Beguine,” the two longest and most famous examples).

The style of Kern’s songs is subtler and far more elusive to trap in words. Is it the simple diatonic structures of their melodies? But Rodgers’ melodies are just as simple and diatonic, for the most part. The high standards of Kern’s craftsmanship in construction? Gershwin’s standards were just as high and

just as well met. Kern’s long, fluid vocal lines? Porter’s are just as long.

In fact, each of these composers has written songs that bear some earmarks of the Kern style: Gershwin’s “But Not for Me,” Porter’s “Why Shouldn’t I?,” Rodgers’ “By and By.” And one can see in Kern’s catalogue indirect return compliments: to Gershwin, “The Siren’s Song”; to Porter, “Remind Me”; to Rodgers, “Long Ago (And Far Away).”

Still, a Kern song is almost always recognizable, even to the untrained ear. It has a “feel,” a “sound” that is distinct and unique. The melody has an enduring freshness. The harmony is usually simple and not very inventive or eventful, yet graceful and clear and full of air. The melodic rhythm is perhaps the strongest point—a direct and simple motif developed through tiny variations into a long and never boring line. There are few syncopations in a Kern melody, and when they occur, they are of the most elemental sort. And yet a Kern line is seldom dull. Each phrase grows out of the preceding one—Kern knew the technique of small-form composition so well that, like any trained composer, he was able to utilize it unconsciously. All of his best songs have that economy indigenous to the best art: the maximum development of the minimum of material.

The roots of Kern’s style were appraised penetratingly and succinctly by Richard Rodgers in *The New York Times* of October 7, 1951:

Kern was typical of what was, and still is, good in our general maturity in this country in that he had his musical roots in the fertile middle European and English school of operetta writing and amalgamated it with everything that was fresh in the American scene to give us something wonderfully new and clear in music writing in the world. Actually he was a giant with one foot in Europe and the other in America. Before he died,

he picked up the European foot and planted it squarely alongside the American one.

Jerome Kern was born in New York City on January 27, 1885. This date seems significant in light of the statement above—Kern was born a generation after Victor Herbert and a generation before Richard Rodgers. Factually as well as stylistically, he was the bridge between the old “Viennese” school and the new indigenous “American” one.

His first published song was a class song he wrote at Newark High School in New Jersey. After high school he studied piano, harmony and composition at the New York College of Music. While still a student, he went to T. B. Harms and Co., the music publishers, to get a job. He wanted practical experience and knowledge of the publishing business, as well as a chance to make contacts and perhaps work his way closer to his goal: writing for the theater. The company hired him as utility man, office boy, piano player and general jack-of-all-jobs. He worked further as a song-plugger at Macy’s department store; when customers wanted to buy sheet music there, he would play the tunes for them, like any salesman demonstrating his product.

But he was more interested in plugging Kern tunes, and he soon found out the best way to do it. In his introduction to *The Jerome Kern Song Book*, Oscar Hammerstein II tells us:

He became a rehearsal pianist, and he used this job as a device for selling his own compositions. Here is how it would work: about the third week in rehearsals, when the directors, producers and the whole company were pretty tired of the Viennese score they had been rehearsing all that time, Jerry would come back early after lunch and start to tinkle a little tune of his own on the piano. Everyone who came in would say, “What’s that?” “Oh, just a little thing of my own,” Jerry would answer. Pretty soon

everyone had thought he had discovered a great potential hit. Jerry’s tune had a freshness for them that the over-rehearsed score couldn’t possibly have, and the first thing you knew he had interpolated a song in the foreign score!

Kern got songs interpolated into shows with such unlikely titles as *Mr. Wix of Wickham* and *The Rich Mr. Hoggenheimer*. The songs themselves had pretty unlikely titles, too: “Poker Love,” for example, and “Don’t You Want a Paper, Dearie?” His first hit was “How’d You Like to Spoon With Me?” from a show called *The Earl and the Girl*. That was in 1905; Kern was twenty. For the next ten years, his interpolations were taken thicker and faster, through a welter of of oddly-named shows: *Fascinating Flora*, *Morals of Marcus*, *Mind the Paint Girl* and *A Winsome Widow*, to name a few. The “interpolation” part of Kern’s career was climaxed in 1914 when he wrote one of his loveliest ballads for *The Girl from Utah*: “They Didn’t Believe Me,” his first standard and a song that refuses to date because—apart from the easy, plaintive melody—the form is still fresh. Kern, in recapitulating the opening section, interpolates a completely new four-bar phrase and then picks up where he left off. The sequence is so natural that the listener is not jolted, and yet the technique is one that has seldom, if ever, occurred in any popular song since.

In 1915, Kern began writing full scores. This was the year that he formed a collaboration with Guy Bolton and P. G. Wodehouse. Together, the three men turned out a series of musicals often referred to as the “Princess Theater Shows,” the Princess Theater being where most of them were produced. This was a tiny house—capacity two hundred and fifty—on West 39th Street. The Princess Theater shows had much the same invigorating effect on musical theater

that *The Garrick Gaities* had nine years later. Both were startlingly new in sound and form—and both for the same reason: necessity. As Hammerstein describes the Princess Theater:

There was no room on the stage for large choruses, and so there were no choruses at all except for ensemble quartets and sextets. A revolutionary orchestra was devised by Kern and his orchestrator, Frank Sadler. A new instrumentation called for only eleven musicians because that was about all the pit would hold. These small shows had an intimate quality and a finesse that could not be matched in the larger houses on Broadway, and for many years the three collaborators were the darlings of the critics as well as the Broadway audiences they strove to please.

Kern's career was now under full steam. In 1915 he was represented in seven productions on Broadway—three of them complete scores. During the subsequent years, the titles of his shows became less and less outlandish (although there were occasional lapses such as 1922's *The Bunch and Judy*) and the titles of his songs more and more well known. The top of his career was reached in 1927 with the production of *Show Boat*. I say "top" because although he wrote three successful Broadway shows afterwards, *Show Boat* is generally considered Kern's best and most popular score. It is the only Broadway score, to my knowledge, to contain as many as five standards: "Bill," "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," "Make Believe," "Why Do I Love You?," and "Ol' Man River." (This list excludes "You Are Love," which is only slightly less well known than the others.)

Kern often stated that "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" (from *Roberta*—1933) was his favorite Kern song. It is *echt* Kern—the melody diatonic but full of leaps, the melodic rhythm simple and repetitious, the release in a key a minor third higher than the preceding section. After *Roberta*, Kern wrote mostly for motion pictures. His Academy Award-

winning "The Way You Look Tonight" (from *Swing Time*—1936), the prototypical Kern ballad, illustrates another characteristic of his: the ability to write "breaks" (fill-in musical phrases written to take up pauses in the vocal line) fully as memorable as the melody itself. The two-note "humming" break here is inseparable from the song in one's memory.

Kern's last show was *Very Warm for May* in 1939. It was a flop, though "All the Things You Are," the first act ballad, was so extraordinary that it survived to become a standard. There is hardly a major pop singer of the pre-Rock 'n' Roll era who at one time or another didn't record this song. The music is unusual in that within a steady circle of fifths, a climax is made by the sudden introduction of parallel tritones in the melody and the bass. (That's for you musicians out there.)

Almost all the songs Kern created were written for either stage or films. A notable exception was "The Last Time I saw Paris." Another: "Day Dreaming." His efforts at abstract (non-theatrical) composition were infrequent and not too successful, the most popular one being his suite for orchestra entitled *Mark Twain*.

In 1945 Kern came East from California to attend rehearsals of a revival of *Show Boat*. A few days after his arrival, he collapsed on Park Avenue and was taken to the hospital on Welfare Island, where he remained in a state of unconsciousness until he died. Hammerstein's description of this is very moving:

He lay unconscious, in the same institution in which Stephen Foster had died. The critical nature of Jerry's condition did not permit his removal to a private hospital. He was in a ward with some fifty or sixty other patients—mental cases, drunks and derelicts for the most part. The doctors had gathered this heterogeneous group together and explained to them slowly and clearly

who the new patient was, and asked them to be very quiet and not create the usual disturbances that characterized this room. Not one man disobeyed. The nurse in charge did not go home that night. She extended her duty for that day to twenty-four hours. When Mrs. Kern expressed her gratitude, the nurse answered simply that he had given so much pleasure to her and the world that she thought she would like to give up something for him. It was clear to us all that special consideration and loving care were being granted to this man in a public hospital not because he was wealthy or powerful but because he had devoted almost all his lifetime to giving the world something it needs and knows it needs—beauty.

In the course of his career, Kern worked with almost sixty collaborators. The lyricists who worked with him most consistently were Dorothy Fields, Otto Harbach, and Oscar Hammerstein II. According to the latter, Kern was a sharp-tongued, quick-humored man who demanded almost as much from others as from himself. Hammerstein points out:

His smooth and effortless melodies . . . are the result of unstinting and meticulous work . . . [Kern] was a worker who would never stop polishing until he was satisfied that a melody had reached its destined and perfect shape. . . . I have seen him struggling hours over a modulation. . . . Smoothness is achieved only by scraping off roughness. . . .

This “smoothness” is what identifies a Kern song. It is true simplicity, not the “simplicity” of the familiar, of the tunes which you whistle going into the theater, but the simplicity of a fresh musical thought spun out and transfigured into a rounded and complete form. And it’s easy to believe that Kern struggled for “hours over a modulation,” because his modulations are so uncomplicated! Even the more unusual transitions (like the ends of the releases of “The Song Is You” and “All the Things You Are”) are simple enharmonic relationships. (That’s another one for you musicians out there.)

Thus it is that Kern’s songs sound so unforced, so easy. But because they have the simplicity of artfulness, they grow richer on rehearing. As with all good music, no matter how large or how small, subtleties begin to shine through the second time around, and new ones appear the third, fifth, tenth and fiftieth times. That is why no American songwriter has written so many standards as Kern. Small and simple and subtle as they are, his songs stand up under countless rehearsals. And this is also why Kern’s music survives the fads of American popular taste. His music deals with the essentials, not the decoration. And the essentials are timeless.