

## What Gives Musical Theatre *Musical* Integrity? An Analysis of the Opening Scene of *South Pacific*

Edward Green

Perhaps no term is more associated with the work of Rodgers and Hammerstein than “the integrated musical.” It has often been stated that with *Oklahoma!* (1943) a new integrity came to the art of Broadway: a true coordination of all its constituent elements.<sup>1</sup> Many historians would disagree, arguing that such a musical existed as early as 1927 with *Showboat*. Others would say Rodgers himself had already approached this ideal by 1940 with *Pal Joey*. However this all may be, there remains a surprising, even shocking, gap in the way most scholars have approached the issue of “integrity” in the “integrated” musical. For if musical theatre is to make a unity of *all* its elements, musical and extra-musical, would it not make sense to ask on what basis it might achieve *musical* integrity?

Rodgers, as early as 1939—several years before the “breakthrough” of *Oklahoma!*—was already insistent that his scores be seen as more than mere tuneful medleys, more than collections of isolated hits. More, even, than a cunning selection of separate musical numbers artfully designed to fit ever-changing dramatic situations. While Irving Berlin—even as late as *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946)—remained largely content with the concept of a show as a collection of effective *independent* numbers, each of which, hopefully, might also achieve extra-theatrical success as a pop hit, Rodgers saw musical theatre, and a composer’s responsibility towards it, differently.<sup>2</sup> In “How to Write Music in No Easy Lessons: A Self-Interview,” which appeared in the October 1939 issue of *Theatre Arts*, he asserted: “I write scores and not isolated song numbers; therefore the particular song in question must bear a family resemblance to the other musical materials in the piece.”<sup>3</sup>

Among the few scholars who have taken Rodgers at his word and have inquired into his works in terms of their structural integrity and large-scale musical coherence is Geoffrey Block.<sup>4</sup> For example, he dedicates eight pages in his 2003 study, *Richard Rodgers*, to how “family resemblances” can be found among the seemingly very divergent melodies of *South Pacific*.<sup>5</sup> In that book, he points out

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Edward Green is a professor at Manhattan School of Music, composer-in-residence for the Aesthetic Realism Theatre Company, and staff composer for Imagery Films. His scholarly articles, ranging from the troubadours to the contemporary Chinese composer Zhou Long, have appeared in such journals as *Choral Music*, the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, and the *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*. He is an award-winning composer, whose most frequently performed orchestral work is the suite *Music for Shakespeare*.

how a prominent repeated motion of leading tone to tonic is a key feature in the concluding phrases of both “A Cockeyed Optimist” and “A Wonderful Guy”—two of Nellie’s most character-defining songs. When “the idea of leading tones moving up to their tonics is broadened to include similar rising half-step resolutions on various tones of the scale,”<sup>6</sup> we observe that two other songs display this particular “familial trait”—“Bali Ha’i” and “This Nearly Was Mine.”<sup>7</sup>

I agree with Block; this “leading tone” motif is important. Yet I believe there are other musical elements at work which are even more central to the structural integrity of *South Pacific*, and to its large theatrical impact. Just how great the musical integrity of this show truly is, I do not think has adequately been appreciated.

### **On the Integrity of a Musical Score**

Before engaging in the core of this article—a detailed technical analysis of the opening scene of *South Pacific*—it might prove useful to make some preliminary comments of a philosophic and methodological nature. A good deal of academic theory in recent decades has been dedicated to the project of showing the limitations, if not the falsity, of a purely formalistic view of theatre. The project has certainly been worthwhile. As usual, however, pendulums swing too far, and so it becomes necessary to right the balance and insist that music—for all its clear imbeddedness in culture, and its capacity to carry encoded sociological meaning—nevertheless has an inexpugnably “abstract,” mathematical aspect to it which resists being subsumed entirely by sociology. A full recognition of the existence and the aesthetic power of this more abstract aspect of music is critical if we wish to answer the question posed in this article: how it is that musical theatre achieves musical integrity?

Only when we keep the “culturally-dependent” and the “abstract” aspects of the art in mind at once—without reducing one to the other—can we only begin to grasp the richness of musical experience in a theatrical context. Audiences respond to both. Perhaps not consciously; but this proviso is hardly limited to the realm of the abstract; the sociologically coded dimensions of music also make their impact on us in a largely subconscious way. Nowhere does the abstract aspect of music affect theatrical audiences more importantly than in their visceral judgment as to whether a show coheres musically. For example, it is clear that Rodgers had the knack, in various shows, to evoke specific locales through his music—through both its melodic content and its orchestral colorations (though credit for this last matter must be shared with others, first and foremost Robert Russell Bennett). Meanwhile, there are many shows which are steeped in “local color”—shows which make a temporary splash, have a successful run on Broadway, but have not achieved the long-lived popularity of Rodgers’s best work. One could think of a show like *Big River*. Its music certainly evoked the America of Huckleberry Finn.

Similarly, the music of *Tenderloin* and the New York of a century ago. Both were good shows—and deservedly popular in their time. Yet they have only rarely been produced since. We need to ask: is at least part of the reason the lack of a deeper musical integrity?

I believe so. In this essay, by focusing on the opening scene of *South Pacific*, I would like to explore what musical integrity is, and to suggest, through this exemplar, that we have underestimated the power for theatrical coherence that is to be found in music's abstract possibilities. Naturally, I am not denigrating the culturally specific aspects of music, nor ignoring their appeal to audiences. I am merely saying that these factors age a great deal faster, and so count for less when we are trying to explain the enduring appeal of a work of musical theatre. As this analysis of *South Pacific* will reveal, Rodgers had a keen interest in not only the overall structural integrity of his shows, but also the specific musical integrity of individual scenes: unifying them internally, while simultaneously differentiating them from the scenes which come earlier and later.

If this is indeed the case, then Rodgers's compositional methodology is part of a long tradition: the "organicism" vision of artistic structure, whose intellectual pedigree can be traced back at least as far as the medieval era, if not earlier.<sup>8</sup> In this vision, an analogy is made between the work of art and a living organism. Just as one would hope each part of one's body maintains its specific physical integrity, one would also hope each individual organ in that body will work in coordination with the rest—and give to that body integrity on a higher, or more all-encompassing level. Translated to theatre: a scene must "function on its own," yet also connect deeply to every other scene and add to the overall liveliness of the show. Just as the fundamental genetics of one's self are imbedded in any given part of one's body—so, by analogy, one would expect to find key musical elements, the "DNA" of a work of musical theatre, to be unobtrusively (yet effectively) present in every scene. As Alan Walker notes in *A Study of Musical Analysis*, "One of the most important things about a musical idea is its potentiality. In a masterpiece, ideas give birth to ideas and these in turn to still newer ones; a network of relationships is established, everything belonging to everything else and ultimately to a single progenitor."<sup>9</sup>

One can legitimately object to the term "progenitor"—for patriarchic overtones might easily be found in it. Hopefully when Rodgers wrote of the "family relations" among his melodies he was not thinking in such hierarchic terms, but rather of an alternative analogy—for the term "family" can be taken as a way of honoring the possibility that, among several independent living beings, there can be a beautiful relation of kinship and uniqueness. Meanwhile, "family"—though it was the term Rodgers chose—is likely not the best way to describe the organic vision of art. That is why I mentioned earlier the analogy with our own bodies. For one's liver

is not the “progenitor” of one’s heart, nor one’s stomach of one’s lungs—but they do share the same underlying genetics!

### A Scene is Analyzed Musically

The method adopted by Rodgers to create musical coherence within a dramatically evolving scene is that of “developing variation”—a term first applied by Arnold Schönberg in his analysis of the music of Brahms.<sup>10</sup> In keeping with this compositional method, the separate numbers share key motivic elements. Meanwhile, as the scene develops these elements are transformed in a manner that reveals character and simultaneously moves the action forward.

The curtain rises in *South Pacific* to reveal a plantation house high on a hill. It is World War Two. Two children enter singing “Dites-moi,”<sup>11</sup> and with them enters the primary musical cell that joins all the melodies in this scene: a rising scalar third, followed by a disjunct falling perfect fourth (see Ex. 1). When we compare

3rd. 4th.

Di - tes - moi \_\_\_\_\_ pour - quoi \_\_\_\_\_ La vie est bel - le

Ex. 1. “Opening” [“Dites-moi”] (14).<sup>12</sup>

the opening phrase of “Dites-moi” to the opening phrases of the later numbers, we see that without exception they are “developing variations” of that core idea.

Let us take each element in turn. We begin with the rising third. In its primal form (in “Dites-moi”) it begins by rising in the key of C major from the third degree of the scale to the fifth—from E to G. In the next song, “A Cockeyed Optimist,” the melody similarly begins by rising up a scalar third, but the key is different (F major) and the melodic motion transverses a different section of the scale, ascending from F to A—the tonic to the third (see Ex. 2). Each of these songs expresses naïve

When the sky is a bright ca - na - ry yel - low\_\_

Ex. 2. “A Cockeyed Optimist” (15).

self-confidence, making us sense a kinship between Nellie and these children, a kinship she will deny at the end of Act I and embrace at the end of Act II. This “natural” optimism is mirrored, technically, in the fact that both songs begin with

direct and rising melodic motion—motion, moreover, bound by elements of the most stable chord in the Western tonal system: the tonic triad. Such melodies have often been seen in our culture as evocative of a sense of naturalness.

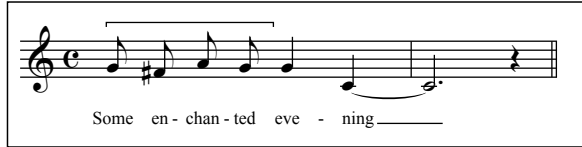
To make more vivid how an abstract, quasi-mathematical coherence of musical sounds functions psychologically, let us use a visual analogy. If an audience—anywhere in the world, and in any century—saw a red triangle of a certain size held up on stage, and then a blue triangle of a similar size and congruent angular structure held up perhaps a foot higher, they would notice the difference, but surely also the kinship. If, later, another triangle were held up by two characters who then toss it back and forth—and the triangle were now green, with sides no longer smooth and straight but roughed-up a bit, and the angles no longer congruent with the previous triangles but weirdly obtuse—they would still recognize this new triangle as a variation of the previous ones. It is perfectly clear that one would not expect a Persian audience from the seventh century to associate triangles with traffic signs, whereas a modern European or American audience might. That would be a coded, historically-dependent meaning; the geometry, as such, is not.

The ear is as keen as the eye in discerning abstract patterns, and sensing when audible shapes are variations of a single beginning mathematical design. Sensing, too, when the variations are emotionally appropriate. Thus, by the time we hear “Twin Soliloquies” and the story has moved forward and the emotional environment no longer accents naïveté, it is time for a more “roughed-up” variation of our auditory “triangle” (see Ex. 3). Nellie and Emile have affected each other; both are

Ex. 3. “Twin Soliloquies” (20).

shaken by it—hesitant to speak out. In keeping with this new emotional coloring, the “motivic cell” of the rising scalar third now takes on a significant variation; it achieves its third note, F#, only after repeated vacillations between the tonic and supertonic—D and E—in the key of D major.

The next song in the opening scene (and its musical climax) is Emile’s “Some Enchanted Evening.” It too is a variation on the same sonic DNA, only this variation is even more developed, in keeping with the fact that we are far further along in the story. Now a group of three scalar pitches, F# G A, no longer present themselves in a simple ascending line. Instead we hear first the central tone of G, and the melody then circles around it (see Ex. 4). Where in the earlier songs the core motif was expressed in purely diatonic terms, included among these three pitches is the sharpened fourth. Altogether these three—the sharpened fourth, the fifth, and the sixth degrees of C major—comprise a more sophisticated, mature, and romantic



Ex. 4. "Some Enchanted Evening" (23).

set of scale degrees, as is proper for Emile's personality and his emotional state at this point in the drama.

Let us also note that the scene begins in C major and has circled around, after songs in F and D major, to another song in C—a "classical" procedure which aims at the clarity of tonal closure.<sup>13</sup> It is a procedure which Mozart would both have recognized and approved.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, "Dites-moi" and "Some Enchanted Evening," in terms of emotional impact, are ever so different—and thus the agreement in key is a way of signaling, nevertheless, a congruence, a coherence of design. C major, incidentally, will likewise conclude Act I and Act II, and thus emerge as the central tonality of the entire composition.

Before considering the second element of the "core DNA" of this scene (and, it may be said, of the musical as a whole)—the descending disjunct fourth—it is useful to ask: why did Rodgers focus so intently on the rising third? What dramatic significance might be encoded within that abstract pattern?

### The Abstract is Never Merely Abstract

As Warren Kirkendale once observed, "Language, whether verbal, pictorial, or musical, owes its effectiveness, indeed its very function as a vehicle for the expression of ideas, to the conventional association of certain modes of expression with certain meanings."<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most thorough-going attempt made thus far to create a lexicon of the emotional content which music has had in "Western Culture," basing this lexicon on a core collection of key various "abstract" intervallic designs that underlay all tonal music, is Deryck Cooke's *The Language of Music*.<sup>16</sup> Cooke first sketches how this language evolved over the centuries, and then notes that its "expressive basis . . . consists of the intricate system of tensional relationships between notes which we call the tonal system."<sup>17</sup> What he does not do—and which some scholars since have begun to attempt—is to see how far the musical language of the West resembles (in its mapping of fairly definite emotional meanings to certain intervallic patterns) the musical languages of other world cultures.<sup>18</sup> This, of course, is a question which would require a great deal of space to discuss with anything like scholarly justice, and that will not be attempted in this essay. I will, however, say that my own belief is that there is a greater kinship present among the various aspects of world music than has been generally acknowledged—including in relation to the very matters Cooke focused on: the emotional meanings that are found within, and which over time adhere to, specific tonal intervals.<sup>19</sup>

In a key passage, Cooke explains what the elemental symbolism of the Western “dialect” of world music is, in terms of melodic motion:

The expressive quality of rising pitch is above all an “outgoing” of emotion: depending on the tonal, rhythmic, and dynamic context, its effect can be active, assertive, affirmative, aggressive, striving, protesting, or aspiring. The expressive quality of falling pitch is of an “incoming” of emotion: depending on context, it can be relaxed, yielding, passive, assenting, welcoming, accepting, or enduring . . . The whole thing is explained when we remember that falling notes are yielding to the tensional, “gravitational” pull back to the lower tonic; rising ones are asserting themselves against that pull.<sup>20</sup>

The melodies in scene one of *South Pacific* all begin with rising motion over the distance of a third. Further, it is rising motion in the context of a “major” tonality which, as Cooke observes, is used “normally to express an out-going feeling of pleasure.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, the pleasure had by the children is unimpeded, as is Nellie’s first melodic gesture. The pleasure in “Twin Soliloquies” is one that needs first a bit of struggle if it is to emerge and be expressed. And the pleasure in “Some Enchanted Evening” is perhaps the most subtle of all; the essential motion of that first musical phrase circles around the fifth—the note G—and thus draws out attention to the two notes which surround it: the augmented fourth, F#, and the major sixth, A.

The “basic expressive functions” of these two scale degrees, Cooke explains, are the following: the *sharp fourth* conveys “active aspiration,” and the *major sixth* “pleasurable longing in a context of flux.”<sup>22</sup> These descriptions are remarkably in keeping with what Emile is feeling, and indicate something of the cunning precision with which Rodgers shaped his melodies; or, to be more precise, varied in a developmental manner the basic motivic cell from which all his actual melodies emerge. It is this procedure which enables us to feel that all the melodies do, indeed, bear “family resemblance.”

Briefly, let us consider the second element of the core idea—the descending, disjunct perfect fourth. It, too, is present in the opening phrase of all the melodies in this scene, helping to unify these melodies. In “Dites-moi,” immediately following the rising scalar third, we hear a descending, disjunct perfect fourth on the word “pourquoi” (see Ex. 5). This is echoed two measures later with another descending fourth, on the word “belle.” In “A Cockeyed Optimist,” the disjunct fourth is highlighted in the concluding melodic gesture of the opening phrase—on the word “yellow” (see Ex. 6). And there are subtle abstract relations between these songs. Compare the melody of the bridge in “A Cockeyed Optimist” (see Ex. 7) to those measures from the opening phrase of “Dites-moi.” Both are structured in

Di - tes - moi \_\_\_\_\_ pour - quoi \_\_\_\_\_ La vie est bel - le

Ex. 5. “Opening” [“Dites-moi”] (14).

yel - low \_\_\_\_\_

Ex. 6. “A Cockeyed Optimist” (15).

But ev - ‘ry whip-poor - will Is sell - ing me a bill

Ex. 7. “A Cockeyed Optimist” (17 and 18).

precisely the same way: two descending fourths which share a tone—thus outlining, overall, a minor seventh. And in the middle, that “shared tone” is given an “upper neighbor-tone” ornament: G A G in the first song; E F# E in the next. Thus, in both passages the notes have not only the same intervallic shape, but also—relative to the prevailing tonality (C for the earlier song, A for the later one)—the same tonal functions: upper tonic; dominant (accompanied by that neighboring ornament); and lower supertonic. The kinship of these passages also extends to the words. The children are asking to be told why life is beautiful. Nellie is affirming her child-like, optimistic sense of life in the face of various “sophisticated” arguments to the contrary.

Continuing with the scene for “Twin Soliloquies,” Rodgers once again places a disjunct, descending fourth as the conclusion of an opening melodic phrase (see Ex. 8). By doing so, he subtly relates this phrase, sung by Nellie, to her previous

Beau-ti - ful and still \_\_\_\_\_

Ex. 8. “Twin Soliloquies” (20).

song. And in the final song of the scene, “Some Enchanted Evening,” we once again hear a descending perfect interval at the end of the initial melodic phrase, only now



it is somewhat expanded—a perfect fifth—perhaps in keeping with the fact that this song conveys the largest, most generous, and most outward show of emotion in the scene. Meanwhile, the phrases that end each of its two stanzas—“Who can explain it, Who can tell you why?” and “Once you have found her, Never let her go”—are outlined by the core element in unexpanded form: the descending fourth (see Ex. 9). As we shall shortly see, it is a characteristic of “Some Enchanted Evening”

Ex. 9. “Some Enchanted Evening” (23 and 25).

(with much symbolic meaning) to wait until the “interior” of the melody to express its most important moments of musical kinship to earlier songs.

As a technical aside, having to do with the power of music to convey—through the expansion and contraction of its intervallic and temporal structures—the drama of hope and fear, confidence and uncertainty in human emotion, let us look at the concluding measures of this song. As Emile repeats “Never let her go!” the melody is a variation, in terms both of expanded musical space and time, of a phrase he sang just minutes earlier in “Twin Soliloquies”—“Climbing up my hill!”—as he lets his imagination picture Nellie living with him (see Ex. 10). This later phrase

Ex. 10. “Twin Soliloquies” (20) and “Some Enchanted Evening” (27).

is pitched higher; moreover, the range of its melodic motion is significantly larger. Earlier it is bounded by an octave: B to B. Now it breaks through that musical boundary and ranges a ninth: D to E. Joined to that higher overall pitch, this abstract difference—of ninth versus octave—adds palpably to our sense that an emotion of increased outwardness and expansiveness is being expressed: the ecstasy of love.<sup>23</sup>

Returning to the first part of our “DNA”—that of the scalar third—it is notable that Rodgers derives the introductory “vamps” to the songs in this scene from that same motif, only inverted, descending rather than ascending.<sup>24</sup> And as we look at these descending introductions—all in major tonality—it is useful to remind ourselves of what Cooke observes about such descents: “To fall in pitch in the major is normally to express an incoming feeling of pleasure.”<sup>25</sup>

For “Dites-moi” the descent is from B to G, inflected chromatically over two measures (see Ex. 11). This, in the key of C, is a descent from the seventh degree

of the scale to the fifth. The introductory figure for “A Cockeyed Optimist” contains syncopated sequences highlighting (in terms of the strongest beats—the downbeats)



Ex. 11. “Opening” [“Dites-moi”] (14).



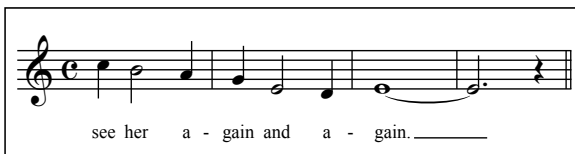
Ex. 12. “A Cockeyed Optimist” (15).



Ex. 13. “Twin Soliloquies” (20).

a set of descending thirds: D to Bb, Ab to F (see Ex. 12). In “Twin Soliloquies” we hear a simple repeated descending figure articulated in even quarter notes (see Ex. 13). Once again, the descent outlines a motion from seventh to the fifth degree of the scale, though this descent is purely diatonic, and the key to the song is higher than that of “Dites-moi”—D major rather than C major.

There is no introductory vamp to Emile’s song; instead its introduction, in keeping with his intense feeling, is already sheer melody: the phrase which, in a moment, we will hear with the words “across a crowded room.” Yet Rodgers has not



Ex. 14. “Some Enchanted Evening” (24).

abandoned his design; he has simply embedded the structural idea of a descending scalar third into the very heart of the song (see Ex. 14). The concluding bars of the “A” section are a clear variation of the introduction to “A Cockeyed Optimist.” The melodic kinship is made even more apparent by the use of the same syncopated rhythm. Rodgers is telling us—through strictly musical means—that Nellie has impressed herself deep within Emile’s soul.

That Rodgers is insistent, throughout this scene, in highlighting a particular motivic design and giving it developing variations, I trust is clear. That he used sophisticated compositional devices to achieve thematic continuity, I trust is

also clear.<sup>26</sup> The theatrical significance of all this virtuosic abstraction, we now explore.

The first thing to note is that abstraction is never only abstraction in a living musical language, any more than the mathematical relation of 98 to 104 in terms of human health is “merely abstract” in a living human being—as anyone who has ever experienced a high fever will verify. Meanwhile, the math remains the math. Thus all thirds, like all triangles—or all fevers, for that matter—have perceptible, mathematical kinship making them different in impact from fourths, rectangles, and chills. Yet even as all thirds share a certain abstract definition, they are also capable of a wide range of emotional subtlety based on many different factors. Among these are: their location in the scale, whether they rise or fall, whether they transverse that territory in direct or in more complex motion, on the rhythm being employed, on their harmonic environment, and even on the orchestral color which accompanies a voice as it sings a melodic pattern outlining a third. A further richness results when any given structural, intervallic cell is joined to another, such as we observed in Rodgers’s various ways of pairing the conjunct rising third with the (largely) disjunct falling fourth.

This means that, as Rodgers creates an “abstract” structure which ties the entire scene together, the sheer variety of ways he finds to express the core “DNA” of the scene leaves him completely free as a dramatic artist to follow its ever-changing emotional atmosphere. The same dialectic of strictness and flexibility obtains over the course of an entire evening of theatre. Through studying this dialectic we can more deeply approach a true understanding of Rodgers’s musical dramaturgy, and what made it both so influential and so successful.<sup>27</sup> As Eli Siegel asked in “Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?”—published in 1955 in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*: “Is there to be found in every work of art a certain progression, a certain indissoluble presence of relation, a design which makes for continuity?—and is there to be found, also, the discreteness, the individuality, the brokenness of things: the principle of discontinuity?”<sup>28</sup> Based on the technical evidence of *South Pacific*, Rodgers is answering: Yes. Much evidence exists to indicate that this show is hardly an exception; beginning at least as early as the mid-1930s, the oneness of thematic continuity and discontinuity through the use of “developing variations” was Rodgers’s essential approach to theatrical composition.

Again, it is critical to see that Rodgers’s concern with long-range thematic cohesion in no way limits his ability to make a suddenly telling and expressive musical gesture. For example, in “A Cockeyed Optimist,” the composer artfully arranges his modulations within the song to underscore the meaning of the words. When Nellie sings “I forget ev’ry cloud I’ve ever seen,” the music suddenly “forgets” the key it began with and modulates to the subdominant, precisely on the accented syllable of “forget.” The subdominant is a key one motion down in the circle of fifths; and so to return to the tonic key of F major, we need to “look

up”—look, in tonal terms, on the “bright side.”<sup>29</sup> When do we return to F? Precisely on the word “optimist,” which—for added emphasis—is given a sudden “kick-up-your-heels” sort of rhythm, as well as a melodic accent on the bright major third of the scale: the note A. We feel the optimism in the modulation, in the rhythm, in that bright note, and also in the ascending melodic line which gets us there. This ability to marshal many distinct parameters of musical structure so that they all contribute to the same emotional point is a characteristic of master composers. If an “integrated musical” makes the various dimensions of theatre cohere, an integrated score does the same for the divergent parameters of music itself.

As Rodgers himself noted, the songs of *South Pacific* “were closely interwoven but still had individuality.”<sup>30</sup> Perhaps nowhere was the composer’s concern with thematic integrity more obvious—and surprising—than in what one might otherwise imagine, by sheer necessity, would be the most extraneous aspect of the score: a song “imported” into *South Pacific* late in its development to “plug a theatrical gap.” A “trunk” song, so-to-speak. I am referring to “My Wife,” a song written some years earlier for *Allegro* but dropped from that show. With new lyrics, yet with the retention of its core melody, “My Wife” became “Younger than Springtime.” (There is irony here—which may have been unrealized by its authors—for as *South Pacific* unfolds, a key to the drama is how racism will make it impossible for Cable to be at ease with the idea of Liat becoming his wife.)

The original song appears not to have worked for *Allegro*. But its “fit” with *South Pacific*, from a technical point-of-view, is beyond doubt. This song’s melody bears a clear structural relation to “Bloody Mary,” a choral song in which the Seabees, mockingly, praise an older Tonkinese woman as “the girl I love.” The initial phrase in each song begins by taking our two familiar “core elements” but

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is for "Younger Than Springtime" in 4/4 time, starting on a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The melody begins with an ascending fourth (G4 to C5) and concludes with a rising scalar third (C5 to E5). The bottom staff is for "Bloody Mary" in 2/4 time, starting on a treble clef with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb). The melody begins with an ascending fourth (G4 to C5) and concludes with a rising scalar third (C5 to E5).

Ex. 15. “Younger Than Springtime” (94) and “Bloody Mary” (30).

presenting them in reversed order; both begin by outlining an ascending fourth and conclude with a rising scalar third (see Ex. 15). Thus, one might speculate that Rodgers chose to take another look at “My Wife” precisely because, consciously or just through artistic instinct, he recognized its musical kinship with his current project. Moreover, the linking of these two songs musically—the fact that they are variations of each other—has dramaturgical aptness. Not only is there a “musical

family relation,” there is also a “family relation” in the ordinary sense of the word—for the object of Lt. Cable’s song “Younger Than Springtime” is Bloody Mary’s daughter, Liat.<sup>31</sup>

### The Songs Interpenetrate

Just as characters interact and change each other as a scene progresses, so, in Rodgers’s subtle musical design, we hear echoes of earlier songs in later ones. As was just pointed out, such echoes have dramaturgical saliency. Let us return to the central plot in *South Pacific*: the evolving love story of Emile and Nellie. One would expect people who fall in love to be deeply affected by each other: to retain the lover’s image in their hearts. That—as we saw—Rodgers found an abstract musical way to convey this, independent of (though in coordination with) Hammerstein’s lyrics, speaks eloquently of his power as a musical dramatist.

Consider again that surprising placement of the introductory figure to Nelly’s song “A Cockeyed Optimist” deep *within* Emile’s melody for “Some Enchanted Evening.” The symbolism is clear: she has so penetrated him that her music now sounds deep within his; has become part of the very substance of his own. Nor is this the only such musical penetration. As Geoffrey Block keenly observes, “In ‘A Cockeyed Optimist’ Nellie completes two internal phrases (on the words ‘yellow,’ ‘bellow,’ and ‘jello’) with a quarter-note triplet. . . . that Emile will adopt no less than nine times in ‘Some Enchanted Evening.’”<sup>32</sup> Half-way through Act II, when Emile is convinced he has lost Nellie, he sings “This Nearly was Mine,” in which, as Block points out, “Emile will return to Nellie’s distinctive rhythmic quirk on the key words of the song, ‘living for’ and ‘paradise.’”<sup>33</sup>

That love is “proud need” was asserted by Eli Siegel. In “Love and Reality,” a chapter from his book *Self and World*, he sheds critical light on what, technically, Rodgers is going after in this song:

Wherever two lives are deeply involved; wherever two selves seek realization through each other, the situation is, basically, somewhere akin. In each instance, there is a process of having another person belong to one and a process of belonging to another. The self goes forward and the self recoils, wherever, while trying to maintain its own power, intactness, or supremacy, it finds another self necessary to its existence. Every love relation is a moving equation of dependence and independence, of giving and conquering . . .<sup>34</sup>

A self can say to another being, “Through what you do and what you are and what you can do, I can come to be more I, more me,

more myself; and I can see the immeasurable being of things  
 more wonderfully of me, for me, and therefore sharply and  
 magnificently kind and akin.”<sup>35</sup>

Emile feels this, and Rodgers brilliantly conveys his feeling through what are strictly musical, and therefore fundamentally abstract, means. Again: in music, the abstract is always present, but is always more than mere abstraction. To understand the role of a theatre composer in shaping the experience of a theatrical evening, we need to see the mastery of that dialectic of abstract and concrete meaning: of emotional expression and structural design. Certainly, if we do not see it, we will never grasp how critical is the role of a theatre composer in giving a production its integrity, its deep coherence.

The greatest moment in *South Pacific*, in terms of the musical presentation of love as a drama of agreement and disagreement, separation and closeness, the welcoming of another self and the desire to recoil and maintain intactness, is “Twin Soliloquies”—the third musical number in this opening scene. This duet is “sequential.” There is no overlap of voices, no simultaneous singing. One’s immediate impression is that the duet is organized as a series of “calls and responses.” Yet on further reflection, it is apparent that Rodgers wants us to take our sequential experience and reconceive it as simultaneity—to sense that Emile and Nellie are actually experiencing these parallel streams of thoughts at the same time.

While this “implied simultaneity” is obvious on the stage, it is by no means obvious how a composer can convey that impression on a strictly musical basis, since music’s meaning is usually so bound up with the linear flow of time. The way Rodgers is able to convey simultaneity is, from a technical point of view, a bravura expression of compositional imagination. It is his harmonic design, essentially, which conveys it. For Nellie, and then for Emile, the first three measures of their opening five-bar phrases are exactly the same (see Ex. 16). Both begin in the key of D. Nellie in her fourth measure, modulates to F#, which is a key in an exquisite, perhaps even “feminine,” relation to D.<sup>36</sup> The customary sense of “femininity” as accenting the “yielding” aspect of human nature—and this was very much the “dominant view” at the time of this show, 1949—is also conveyed through the falling motion on the words “beautiful and still.” Emile, to the contrary, is painted musically in what could be taken as distinctly “masculine” colors; in his fourth measure the modulation has a straight-forward boldness and directness as he goes from D major to G, and does so with a melodic phrase that swiftly and assertively ascends a G major arpeggio on the words “climbing up my hill.”

Sitting in our theatre seats, we hear Emile *after* Nellie has modulated to F#. The fact that he enters in the key she began in—D major—and that the music takes us there without any transition at all, forces us to feel his phrase is actually a return

(D) (F#)

*Nellie:* Won-der how I'd feel liv-ing on a hill-side, Looking on an o-cean, Beau-ti-ful and still. \_\_\_\_

(D)

*Emile:* This is what I need, This is what I've longed for, Some-one young and smil-ing,

(G)

Climb-ing up my hill! \_\_\_\_

Ex. 16. “Twin Soliloquies” (20).

in time to the moment when Nellie too began to sing. When Nellie sings again, she is suddenly in the key of C. From the point of view of strictly “linear” time, this seems to make Nellie’s second phrase a result of Emile’s last statement, for G (where he concludes) is the dominant of C, and no harmonic motion in Western music is stronger, and conveys more the sense of “inevitability,” than one from dominant to tonic. Yet if we hear her words *not* as a response to his (for, in truth she is unaware of them) but rather as a continuation of her own thoughts, then we realize this is anything but a smooth or “inevitable” entry. For no two keys are in a more anguished tonal relation to each other than F# major and C major. A tritone apart, no two keys could do more to negate each other.<sup>37</sup> And negation is exactly what her words express. From sweetly imagining life with Emile on the plantation as “beautiful and still,” she suddenly remembers the deep cultural divide between them, as well as their large difference in age, and she brings herself up short, saying: “We are not alike. Probably I’d bore him. He’s a cultured Frenchman, I’m a little

(F#) (C)

*Nellie:* Beau-ti-ful and still. \_\_\_\_ We are not a-like. Prob-a-bly I'd bore him.

(F)

He's a cul-tured French-man, I'm a little hick. \_\_\_\_

Ex. 17. “Twin Soliloquies” (20).

hick” (see Ex. 17).

Her second phrase concludes in the key of F, continuing the circle of downwards fifths which has been a developing structural motion in this song.<sup>38</sup> Emile then

enters in the key of A—a major third higher, just as Nellie’s first modulation (from D to F#) was a major third higher. If her motion down a fifth (from C to F) mirrored his earlier descent, from D to G, then here he is learning from her!<sup>39</sup> The “interpenetration” of selves is being conveyed to us through exquisitely subtle

(F) (A)

*Nellie:* I'm a lit-tle hick. \_\_\_\_\_ *Emile:* Young-er men than I Off-i-cers and doc-tors,

Prob-a-bly pur-sue her, she could have her pick. \_\_\_\_\_

Ex. 18. “Twin Soliloquies” (20 and 21).

musical symbolism (see Ex. 18).

Where the first impression we got of Nellie’s C major entrance was of a natural blend, a smooth progression—(only to realize later how disruptive it truly was)—our first impression here is of discontinuity. Emile’s A major, a key with three sharps, is very different from Nellie’s F major, a key with one flat. Yet Rodgers’s art has amazing equipoise—for this discontinuity will soon reveal itself as continuity; out of this disagreement will emerge an emotionally crucial agreement. Even as Emile now worries that “Younger men than I, officers and doctors, probably pursue her, she could have her pick,” for the first time in this duet a phrase begins and ends in the same key. We feel that, despite his uncertainty, something is “gaining solidity” in Emile.

Interestingly, this key—A major—is “brighter” and therefore, symbolically, more hopeful than where we started; we are now a perfect fifth *higher*: A, rather than the initial D, major. It seems Emile is more in agreement with himself. And even as there are two more phrases to the duet—one for Nellie, and another for Emile—these stay put in that bright tonality. Literally, Nellie and Emile have found their “home key.” Moreover, from now on, their melodies are nearly identical.

Rodgers held a goal for himself, as we have seen, of creating “scores”—coherent works of musical theatre. Coherence is critical to a classical sense of musical aesthetics: a sense he plainly had, and which perhaps was strengthened in him during his study, from 1920 to 1924, with the German theorist Percy Goetschius at the Institute of Musical Arts. To be “a” work of art—a single thing rather than a mere compound, an engaging medley or scintillating “hodgepodge” of divergent elements—an evening of musical theatre must have that “design making for continuity,” of which Eli Siegel wrote. Yet, as he also noted, there must be, as well, “the individuality, the brokenness of things: the principle of discontinuity.” Therefore, if a composer knows his or her business, a new scene



will present something strikingly fresh musically, and yet cohere with everything that has happened before.

This is precisely what Rodgers does as the second scene begins. “Bloody Mary,” its opening song, is also the first choral number in the show—a strikingly new sound. Moreover, it also presents jazz-like syncopations for the first time. (Neither Nellie nor Emile is particularly “hip.”) And its key, Eb major, is very different from the C major which began and ended scene one. All this audibly differentiates it from the music of the preceding scene; just as clearly as the shift of sets—from the plantation to the Navy base—does, and the introduction of an entirely new set of characters. Yet musically Rodgers also connects the scenes. What outlines the structure of the opening phrase of “Bloody Mary” is the exact same primary cell we heard so constantly in scene one—that is, a scale up a third connected to a perfect fourth—only now the fourth comes at the beginning of the melodic phrase, and the rising third at the end, and the fourth is no longer descending, but, like the third which makes up the other element of the show’s “DNA,” also rises. The next song, “There is Nothin’ Like A Dame,” makes use of this new configuration, only with one more “twist” of developing variation. Now these rising intervals characterize, consecutively and independently, the two large sections of that number: “We’ve got sunlight on the sand,” (the rising fourth—which evolves to include ever-larger disjunct intervals as the song progresses) and “There is Nothing Like a Dame” (the rising conjunct third; see Ex. 19).

The image shows two musical phrases on a single staff in G major (one sharp). The first phrase, "We got sun-ight on the sand,", is in 2/4 time and consists of the notes G4, A4, B4, C5, with a bracket above the last three notes labeled "4th.". The second phrase, "There is noth-in' like a dame, —", is also in 2/4 time and consists of the notes G4, A4, B4, C5, with a bracket above the last three notes labeled "3rd.".

Ex. 19. “There Is Nothin’ Like A Dame” (34 and 37).

As these examples indicate, Richard Rodgers was a composer who was deeply concerned to give his scores integrity—dramatic integrity, to be sure; but also musically abstract, structural integrity. Rodgers is, of course, highly esteemed in the world of musical theatre. Yet he is not often credited with this kind of musical finesse—this kind of technical depth and subtlety. One who did recognize it was Stephen Sondheim. Said the creator of *Sweeney Todd* and *Sunday in the Park with George*: “His work tended to make people think of him as an unsophisticated, platitudinous hick, whereas [Rodgers] was a highly intelligent, strongly principled, very firm-minded, and philosophic man.”<sup>40</sup> It can, in fact, be argued that some of the most sophisticated musical structures ever created for Broadway were those invented by Rodgers.

## Notes

1. See Stanley Green's classic statement of that point of view in *The World of Musical Comedy* (Cranbury, N.J.: A. S. Barnes, 1968) 269.

2. See chapter 11 of Philip Furia's *Irving Berlin: A Life in Song* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998).

3. Richard Rodgers, "How to Write Music in No Easy Lessons: A Self-Interview," *Theatre Arts* Oct. 1939: 743.

4. Another is Felix Cox. See his article, "'A faltering step in a basically right direction': Richard Rodgers and All Points West," *American Music* (Fall 2005): 355-376.

5. Geoffrey Block, *Richard Rodgers* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003) 163-170.  
6. 165.

7. Though Block does not mention it, this "motif" of a repeated motion from leading tone to upper tonic actually begins in the very first song of the show, "Dites-moi." In the concluding phrase—"Est-ce-que, parceque, vous m'aimez?"—we hear it three times.

8. See, for example, chapters seven and eight in Umberto Eco's *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986).

9. Alan Walker, *A Study of Musical Analysis* (New York: Free Press, 1962) 47.

10. I am not implying an immediate Brahmsian influence on Rodgers but rather an artistic affinity. Nevertheless, there may have been some direct influence: Rodgers's principal teacher at the Institute for Musical Arts (1920-1924) was Percy Goetschius, a German theorist, who loved Brahms and wrote on thematic integrity in his large-scale compositions.

11. While, as I said, there is honest questioning of the Cable-Liat subplot, it is necessary to place this disreputable aspect of the story (which goes by without ethical comment) with other aspects of the show, which were plainly intended to oppose racism and raise sharp ethical questions about it. Consider the use of "Dites-moi" as the show's "opener." Subliminally, Rodgers and Hammerstein are challenging their audience right from the start—for rather than open with a beguiling feminine chorus line (or something of the sort) here instead is a somewhat "formal" duet for two French-speaking Eurasian children, who mimic an adult courtship ritual. To begin a Broadway show in this manner, foregrounding—in various ways—a world of human difference from the perspective of the adult, white, English-speaking audience, is to force that audience to confront itself. How will it respond? With contempt and annoyance—as in, "I paid good money for this show; why can't they sing in English?"—or with delight? A related theatrical gambit was made in 1927 by Hammerstein for *Showboat*, in which the very first words from the stage were tough protests from black dockworkers about the injustice of "de white man boss."

12. All musical examples are based on the 1949 piano.vocal score of *South Pacific*, edited by Dr. Albert Sirmay and published by Williamson Music, Inc. (New York).

13. As a "bookend" to the scene, Rodgers has a brief reprise of "Dites-moi." It is also in C major.

14. All of Mozart's adult operas begin and end in the same tonality. We make a mistake, however, to assume this was "standard procedure" in his time period. For instrumental works, yes; for theatrical, no. In terms of theatrical history, Mozart was innovative in this regard.

15. Warren Kirkendale, "New Roads to Old Ideas in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*," *The Creative World of Beethoven*, ed. Paul Henry Lang (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971) 164.

16. Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1959).

17. 40.

18. See, for example, Michael Tenzer's *Gamelan Gong Kebyar: The Art of Twentieth-Century Balinese Music* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000). See also the paper "Implicit Learning of Indian Music by Westerners" presented by Jay Rahn (and co-authored by Emmanuel Bigand and Bénédicte Poulin) at the First International Conference on Interdisciplinary Musicology held at the University of Graz in April 2004, under the sponsorship of the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music (ESCOM). The conclusion of the authors is "An implicit-learning design holds promise for corroborating and clarifying cross-culturally various musical systems' claims to universal validity," and the paper itself gave powerful evidence, from carefully constructed, double-blind testing, that Europeans, untrained in Indian musical aesthetics, could nevertheless swiftly—and with great accuracy—determine what emotion (or *rasa*) different *ragas* are said to embody. The paper, unfortunately, is not yet published.

19. I addressed the issue of how far one might legitimately speak of a "universal" view of music through a presentation I co-authored with anthropologist Arnold Perey, entitled "Aesthetic Realism: A New Foundation for Interdisciplinary Musicology," the Proceedings of the 2004 ESCOM Conference, ed. R. Parncutt, A. Kessler, and F. Zimmer, and posted on-line at <[http://www.petey-anthropology.net/world\\_music/escom\\_1.htm](http://www.petey-anthropology.net/world_music/escom_1.htm)>.

20. Cooke, *The Language of Music* 104-105.

21. 105.

22. 90.

23. Since the etymology of “ecstasy” implies a standing outside a familiar sense of boundary, it is very appropriate that here Rodgers creates, in that concluding phrase, a melodic shape that breaks past the octave—an interval that is highly symbolic of order and boundary.

24. This, let it be noted, is a venerable technique in the “Germanic” school of composition to which Rodgers was introduced by Goetschius. Since Brahms was mentioned earlier, in the context of “developing variations,” consider how the orchestral introduction to the chorus “*Wie lieblich sind seine Wohnungen*” from the *Deutsches Requiem* is an exact inversion of the vocal melody that follows.

25. Cooke, *The Language of Music* 106.

26. See Walker, *A Study of Musical Analysis*, especially “Part Two: Principles of Thematic Continuity,” for a detailed study of how the use of the various “mirror forms” has been a staple technique of Western composers since at least the time of Machaut in the early fourteenth century.

27. Perhaps the greatest achievement by a composer of musical theatre using the technique of “developing variation” on simple core motivic material is that of Wagner in his Ring cycle, where a single evolving set of leitmotifs unifies four complex evenings of opera.

28. Eli Siegel, “Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14 (1955): 282-283.

29. For an extended study of how motion along the circle of fifths has been used in recent centuries in Western music to symbolize the rise and fall of human emotion, especially as regards hope and fear, see the recent work of Eric Chafe, including his *Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: U of California P, 1991) and *Analyzing Bach Cantatas* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).

30. Block, *Richard Rodgers* 164.

31. Certainly there is well-warranted questioning of the ethics of this subplot, in which an Asian mother is blithely presented as “selling” her daughter to a G.I. I am not engaging this matter, though naturally I am in sympathy with the criticism. I am merely focusing on the more “abstract” musical issues involved in the score.

32. Block, *Richard Rodgers* 168.

33. 168.

34. Eli Siegel, *Self and World* (New York: Definition Press, 1981) 186.

35. 190-191.

36. The presence of encoded “gendered” inflections in various harmonic and tonal motions in Western music has been a matter of much recent musicological investigation.

37. Elsewhere in *South Pacific* Rodgers also makes use of the power of the tritone to symbolize negation. Felix Cox points out: “At the end of act I, the final reprise of ‘Cockeyed Optimist’ seems at first glance to bring the relationship full circle, even to the point of the couple singing a true duet for the first time. . . . But the key of this song is G flat, the furthest possible from C. Indeed, it is very soon thereafter that the central conflict of the musical is presented, as Emile reveals that his first wife was Polynesian and that the two mixed-race children in the house are his.” (Cox, “‘A faltering step’” 375).

38. The duet begins in D; Emile takes us to G—a fifth lower. Nellie enters in C, and cadences her second phrase in F: two further descending motions by a fifth.

39. Without wishing to push the logic of “musical integrity” too far, it is notable that the modulations employed in this song—of a rising (major) third, and a falling perfect interval (here, a fifth)—bear a striking resemblance to the *melodic* “DNA” I was describing earlier.

40. Stephen Sondheim, *A Dictionary of Musical Quotations*, comp. Ian Crofton and Donald Fraser (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985) 98.



# THE FIELD

