

Stephen Sondheim's Gesamtkunstwerk: The Concept Musical As Wagnerian Total Theatre

2005

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STEPHEN SONDHEIM'S GESAMTKUNSTWERK: THE CONCEPT MUSICAL AS
WAGNERIAN TOTAL THEATRE

by

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M.A. University of Central Florida, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Theatre
in the College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term
2005

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ABSTRACT

Stephen Sondheim, famous for writing such musicals as *Company*, *Into the Woods*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Assassins*, is often referred to as the originator of the modern concept musical. Despite varying definitions of the concept musical, it is generally agreed that the form embodies a specific identity or mood, which it communicates to an audience both emotionally and intellectually. As such it offers audience members a complete experience resembling in theory the idea of “total theatre” proposed in the nineteenth century by composer Richard Wagner.

My thesis will argue that the similarity between Sondheim’s concept musical and Wagner’s total theatre is more than purely theoretical; it is practical as well, involving structural parallels such as leitmotif, minor chord development, and intricate lyricism. Congruently, many of Sondheim’s choices describing communication with audiences on the emotional and intellectual levels also recall those utilized by Wagner over a century earlier.

These similarities notwithstanding, Sondheim, as a contemporary artist, creates work that has often been described in terms of theoretical movements that post-date Wagner, including “deconstructionism” and Brechtian theatre. While these terms certainly describe some differences between the work of Sondheim and Wagner, I will argue that their existence with regard to Sondheim does not preclude a Wagnerian approach to the contemporary composer’s work. Elements of deconstruction and Brechtian alienation may, in fact, be linked back to Wagner in specific manners. My thesis will explore these connections, concluding that an approach to the work of Sondheim in the vein of Richard Wagner may suggest a successful method of interpreting the contemporary concept musical.

I fondly dedicate this thesis to Mom and Dad, who have always encouraged me to proudly and wholeheartedly pursue what makes me happy in life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the dedication and undying support of my advisor and mentor, Dr. Julia Listengarten. Her teaching, encouragement, and confidence in my achievements have allowed me to reach many milestones in my academic career, and she remains a source of inspiration as I continue to learn and grow.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim's revolutionary contributions to musical theatre have been critically debated worldwide in essays, reviews, academic journals, classrooms, popular periodicals, internet chat rooms, and interviews with Sondheim and those with whom he has worked. Among producers, directors, actors, critics, and audience members who address his work regularly, Sondheim's shows have become the topic of complex discussion of theme and structure in the modern musical. It seems that in becoming the subject of such analytical debate, Sondheim has contributed to the increased image of musical theatre as an intellectually stimulating experience. In 1998, Robert Brustein commented on the implications of the barrage of critical writing dealing with Sondheim's work:

“Refrains such as this say a great deal about what’s been happening in university classrooms these days. It says even more about what’s happening to our culture when the fourteen works of a highly talented composer for the New York musical theatre – a temple of high art primarily to those who vote for Antoinette Perry awards – are treated with the same kind of exegetical reverence as the Eroica” (The New Republic 6/29/98).

Brustein articulates the idea that Sondheim's musicals have traditionally been addressed as a form of “high art” to an extent that is unprecedented when discussing musical theatre. Sondheim, then, is at least partially responsible for a recent elevation of discussion of musical theatre in a critical and theoretical context. Given this elevation, it is not surprising that most published critical and theoretical analyses of musical theatre in history have come about only within the past twenty-five years, within the “Sondheim Era,” when musical theatre has begun to strengthen its identity within theatre theory and criticism.

It is appropriate, then, to discuss Sondheim's work as it exists within the context of theatre theory. In this vein, Sondheim's work has been compared to that of the ancient Greeks¹, shown to resemble Brecht's Theatre of Alienation², and also placed in a postmodern context³. In addition, several writers have referred to what they see as a correlation between Sondheim's "concept musicals" and the idea of *Gesamkuntswerk*, or Total Work of Art, proposed by nineteenth century composer and theatre theorist Richard Wagner. For example, in 1983, Dan J. Cartmell observed in his dissertation entitled *Stephen Sondheim and the Concept Musical* that "in some ways the concept musical begins to fulfill the goal of Richard Wagner's *Gesamkuntswerk*, a composite work where all the arts, especially music, dance and poetry join in an ideal synthesis as a pure work of art" (98). Then in 1990, Eugene Robert Huber wrote a dissertation entitled *Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince: Collaborative Contributions to the Development of the Modern Concept Musical, 1970-1981*, in which he chose to define the modern concept musical as "a direct descendant of Richard Wagner's *Gesamkuntswerk*" (7). Sondheim theorist Joanne Gordon also observes that "with each musical and lyrical nuance perfectly matched to the particular character in the particular situation, music, lyric, character and plot are interwoven into a seamless whole, closer to Wagnerian opera than traditional musical comedy (7). Similarly, reviewers have referred to Sondheim productions in Wagnerian

¹ Barbara Means Fraser, in her essay "Revisiting Greece: The Sondheim Chorus", states that "the structure of the chorus in many of Stephen Sondheim's musicals resembles the Greek chorus more strongly than a more typical chorus of the American Musical" (223).

² Thomas P. Adler describes *Pacific Overtures* as "most overtly Brechtian" and cites critic Emanuel Azenberg as saying that Sondheim's musicals contain "a dose of Brechtian alienation or estrangement" (40). Also, many reviewers have attested to Brechtian elements in *Sweeney Todd*, including Jack Kroll, who compared the piece with *The Threepenny Opera* (*Newsweek* 3/12/79).

³ Edward T. Bonahue, Jr.'s essay, "Portraits of an Artist: *Sunday in the Park with George* as 'Postmodern' Drama" (171-185) explores this view, as does S. F. Stoddard's essay, "Visions and Revisions: The Postmodern Challenge of *Merrily We Roll Along*" (187-198).

terms as examples of “Total Theatre” as did Howard Kissel, in his 1979 review of *Sweeney Todd* (*Women’s Wear Daily* 3/2/79). Finally, music theorists such as Stephen Banfield tend to agree that Sondheim’s concept musicals “imply a kind of Wagnerian *Gesamkuntswerk*” (147) and have noted the utilization of Wagnerian techniques in the construction of Sondheim’s own work (303 and 305). At various levels of criticism, then, it seems that Sondheim’s work serves to advance a basic approach to writing for the theatre, articulated by Richard Wagner over a century and a half ago.

I am interested first in defining this observed correlation between Wagner’s Total Theatre and Sondheim’s concept musical, then in discovering Sondheim’s further contributions to the form within the context of this correlation. In order to accomplish this, in Chapter 1 I will choose an accepted definition of the contemporary term “concept musical” and the further specified reference to *Sondheim’s* concept musical. In Chapter 2 I will analyze the parallels between Sondheim’s concept musical and Wagner’s Total Theatre. Finally, in Chapter 3, I will discuss some analyses of Sondheim’s concept musical that appear to indicate its divergence from the theory of Total Theatre, applying contemporary notions of deconstruction and Brechtian alienation to ultimately emphasize the established parallels between the work of Sondheim and Wagner. In conclusion, I will articulate the way in which Wagner’s overall approach to audience perception may be applied to achieve a further understanding of Sondheim’s concept musicals in production.

CHAPTER TWO: DEFINITION OF THE CONTEMPORARY CONCEPT MUSICAL

Part One: Evolution of the Form

Definitions of the contemporary concept musical have ranged widely since the term became popular in the 1970s, and the identity of the concept musical has evolved during the last few decades in response to modern audiences' growing ability to view musical theatre as a fully developed, mature form of theatrical expression. Throughout the short history of the concept musical's evolution, the form has come to embody the presentation of an idea, or concept, in production for an audience. From the "integrated" book musicals of the first half of the twentieth century to the modern developments of Stephen Sondheim, the concept musical has evolved utilizing a synthesis of definitive techniques and approaches.

It is generally agreed that the immediate precursor to the concept musical is the integrated musical that became popular in America during the first half of the twentieth century. In contrast to the vaudevilles and musical revues that dominated live musical entertainment at the turn of the century, integrated musicals eschewed the "nightclub" number format in favor of the continuous development of a single main plot. Audiences of the integrated musical could thus view a linear production in which music, script, and dance were interwoven as tightly as possible in support of a smooth revelation of the main plot and the characters associated with it (Bordman 485). Structural elements such as musical underscoring and choreography could then lend weight to characters' motives and roles within the action on stage, reinforcing character and plot. Gerald Bordman credits Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's *Showboat* (1927) as one of the most

prominent examples of this type of musical.⁴ In *Showboat*, a way of life is described and a single main story dominates the musical. Songs such as “Old Man River” and “Life Upon the Wicked Stage” accomplish more than simply the presentation of vignettes to the audience; they are representative of specific characters’ roles pertaining to the story and the ways in which their lives intertwine within the world of the musical as a whole.⁵ Audiences may watch such a production and understand it based upon the causal relationship of sequential events onstage and characters that continually communicate feelings and actions through song, speech, and movement. For example, when Julie sings “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man,” Joe states that he has never heard anyone but black people sing that song, revealing Julie’s mixed heritage and identifying the song as a symbol of who Julie is within the context of the plot presented. Her identity is significant to the plot because it foreshadows Julie’s fate of being left alone as a result of her heritage and past. Later, Julie reprises the song with more emotion, having lived its lyrics, signifying a simultaneous evolution of character and plot from one point in the musical to the next. This type of portrayal of linear plot and character development through the synthesis of music, lyrics, and movement, then, became the trademark of the integrated musical in contrast to the episodic, revue-like structure of the vaudevilles and flashy musical melodramas of the preceding decades.

Building upon this foundation, Rodgers and Hammerstein were the next generally recognized creators to refine the technique of integration with *Carousel* (1945). In this musical, underscoring was utilized to an unprecedented extent to introduce seamless transitions from song

⁴Eugene Huber also explores integration in *Showboat* in some depth in his dissertation chapter on this musical. (14-26)

⁵ Laurence Maslon, in his book *Broadway: The American Musical*, discusses these songs as they contribute to the seamless quality of the musical, which was based on a novel by Edna Ferber (112-119).

to speech and vice versa. The underscoring served to combine music and speech patterns in a way that did more than simply reveal the nature of character and plot; it advanced these elements within the music and lyrics themselves. That is, beginning with *Carousel*, characters on the musical stage would not simply relate their relationships and feelings to the audience through song; they would actually utilize the songs to advance those relationships and the relevant themes of the piece. Martin Gottfried provides a detailed analysis of *Carousel*'s "bench scene," which he considers to be a landmark in the real-time advancement of plot and theme: "lyric theatre" (28) in which spoken text is integrated with sung verse, allowing the words and lyrics to not only convey a relationship, but to advance that relationship. Here, Julie Jordan and Billy Bigelow discover their love in alternating speech and lyrics, presenting their audiences with musically underscored character nuances and descriptive commentary in conjunction with the real time advancement of the plot itself as achieved by the song "If I Loved You." When the scene/song is over, the characters' relationship has advanced to a level different than that at the beginning. Simultaneously, the song's lyrics illustrate the evolution of one of the main themes of the show – the concept of "if" and its role in defining the characters' dreams and romantic desires. Audience members are then able to react to the constant evolution of character and story while reflecting on theme, since all of these elements could be simultaneously developed through a single song. Real-time advancement of plot and themes explored within song were thus the driving elements within musicals of this time; and music, lyrics, speech, and movement were interwoven as in *Carousel* to contribute to the advancement of plot and theme. By the 1940's, it was this type of plot-based "integrated" show that embodied the image of the modern musical.

Then in 1947, Rodgers and Hammerstein again created a landmark show in the form of *Allegro*, which is often credited as the first “concept musical.”⁶ Modeled after Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, *Allegro* tells the story of a small-town American doctor faced with the moral dilemma of whether to pursue an affluent city career or to devote his life to helping patients less fortunate. This musical stands out through the fact that the abstract mood, or the “concept” of the moral dilemma and the overall challenge presented by such a dilemma becomes more important than any specific plot or character element. According to Hammerstein, “I wanted to write a large universal story” (Green 274), one in which the characters would become more representational than individual, allowing universal themes to preclude the particulars of plot and individual character development. Conceptual elements, then, such as moral challenge and the image of small-town America addressed in the show as a whole thus took precedence over the plights of the specific characters.

The show thus moved the integrated musical into the conceptual realm, since the priority became the presentation of the universal theme of moral dilemma to the audience, offering audience members the opportunity to form their own commentary on the thematic issues raised. That is, audience members were no longer asked to simply follow a linear plot and find the meaning within it as applied to specific characters, as in *Carousel*; now they were presented with an idea, a central concept, and asked to form their own reactions based upon their knowledge of society as it applied to the universal world of the musical. According to musical historian Denny Martin Flinn, *Allegro* was the first musical to lend priority to idea or concept, rather than plot. In

⁶ According to Stephen Citron, “[Critics] often cite *Allegro* as the first concept musical, or a show written around a theme” (41). Some contemporary directors also take this view, as shown by Washington Post journalist Michael Toscano’s January, 2004, interview with Eric Schaeffer, artistic director of Arlington’s Signature Theatre. Toscano quotes Schaeffer as saying that *Allegro* is the “first concept musical,” a landmark achievement that contributed to warranting an updated production of the show at the Signature Theatre (*The Washington Post* 1/1/2004).

Flinn's words, "[*Allegro*] set the course for Harold Prince and Stephen Sondheim, for presentational numbers, for fluidity, for concept..." (234). Before this musical, the emphasis in musical theatre lay within the integration of the elements of music, dance, speech, and theme in order to tell a seamless story. Beginning with *Allegro*, however, the emphasis shifted to integrating music, dance, speech, theme, and story itself in order to support a central mood or concept. Following *Allegro*, then, the Broadway musical no longer needed to be plot based; instead, the concept musical's primary function was to promote a particular ideological mood for its audience, setting up a format that allowed audiences to adopt universal perspective and thus develop their own meaning based on the themes presented.

This goal of de-emphasizing plot in favor of provoking audience reflection on a universal thematic idea formulated the need for a structure that allowed each musical to communicate its concept in its own manner. In developing *Allegro*, for example, Rodgers and Hammerstein utilized a Greek structure that featured a chorus offering annotation to the action and advice to the characters. Consequently, the musical numbers became episodic commentary, somewhat in the vein of the vaudevilles that preceded the integrated musical. Unlike the earlier vaudeville numbers, however, these musical numbers were not written to exist in separate contexts; each number was intended to work closely with speech and movement and other musical numbers to describe a common theme, as in the integrated musicals. Since these musicals were not driven by plot, storyline no longer determined their structure, and universal themes described their meaning for an audience. It seems that the concept musical, then, prioritizes theme and minimizes plot structure. This was the basic idea upon which concept musicals took shape over the next several decades.

According to numerous historians and theorists, the concept shows that followed *Allegro* include such diverse productions as *Love Life* (1948), *Hair* (1968), *A Chorus Line* (1975), *Cats* (1982), *Baby* (1983), *Starlight Express* (1987), and others. Given these shows' widely-ranging characters, plots, presentation styles, and dates of origin, musical theatre analysts have not surprisingly differed extensively in their attempts to pinpoint a precise definition for the concept musical. Each of these shows embraces a specific structure to describe theme, as stated above regarding the elements of Greek drama in *Allegro*; however, the nature of the relationship between structure, theme, and concept has been widely debated. Therefore, an analysis of varying theories is necessary in order to reach a working definition of the concept musical.

The relationship between concept and theme has perhaps proven the most evasive. It seems that, based upon the above analysis, the term *concept* could possibly refer interchangeably to the universal theme addressed in a concept musical, since theme describes meaning. Yet this is not exactly the case. Richard Kislán, in fact, offers a definition that compares the idea of *concept* with that of *theme*, but he differentiates between concept and theme as follows: "The theme of a musical show is its main idea; the concept of a musical production is how that idea is embodied or interpreted... Concept reaches beyond theme into some statement or image of what the show means to be, or what it intends to do, or how it will go about doing it" (182). Kislán infers that the concept describes the "personality" of the show; concept is not simply what the show is *about*, but rather what the show *is*. Concept, then, describes an abstract entity; it seems in itself intangible, but it finds its existence in the synthesis of other elements of the musical, such as music, speech, movement, theme, etc... Thus, according to Kislán, much of the concept lies in the very fabric of the show – how it is structured and presented to the audience, in addition to the themes it addresses.

This definition of concept as the “personality” of a concept musical is appropriate since it describes a necessary amalgamation of structure and theme; these two elements are inseparable if they are to describe a concept. The concept, then, is not structure or theme, but rather the result of their collaboration. For example, the structure of Sondheim’s concept musical *Assassins* resembles that of the vaudeville, or early American musical revue, thus reflecting the show’s thematic content, centering on Americana. Theme and structure function together in a realization of a concept dealing with the turmoil of presidential assassination in America; both are necessary to the concept and contribute to the description of the piece as a concept musical. Neither the theme nor the structure of such a piece could fully describe concept on its own. That is, themes of Americana might be explored in a plot-based musical (*George M!* is an example), but without the vaudevillian presentation style these themes do not describe a concept. Conversely, a vaudevillian presentation style cannot form a concept by itself; without a reigning theme, a piece featuring such a style would simply be a turn-of-the century vaudeville consisting of unrelated vignettes.

Because the nature of the concept musical relies upon structure as well as theme, the role of presentation style becomes important in defining a show as a concept musical. In a plot-driven musical, the cause and effect nature of the plot tends to dictate the structure of the show, meaning that one scene follows another in order to properly relate a story that makes sense to the audience. When a show is not driven by plot, however, it must employ some other format, or presentation style, for structuring itself. Therefore, in a concept musical one scene follows another in order to reflect the presentation style of the show rather than the plot. Ethan Mordden addresses this point by stating that a concept show “is a presentational rather than strictly narrative work” (127). Utilizing the term “presentational,” Mordden refers to the method

of addressing the musical's overall identity through structural detail, or "presentation." In *Allegro*, the presentation style embodies the Greek chorus as described above; while in *Assassins* the presentation style is vaudevillian. In *A Chorus Line*, the presentation style features an audition structure, since the cast members are "auditioning" for a show within a show, thus becoming the show itself. When they tell their life stories to the character of the casting director during their audition, they are actually "presenting" those stories for the real-life audience, providing a direct presentational commentary on the life of a dancer and creating the mood of a realistic audition. Other concept shows, such as *Into the Woods*, *Cats*, and *Starlight Express* employ elements of fantasy to introduce concept. In Mordden's words, a show such as these, in which fairy tale worlds collide, the animal world adopts qualities of the human world, and high tech futuristic characters roller skate on stage, "[utilizes] avant-garde techniques to defy unities of place, time, and action" (127). In these cases, it is these "avant-garde techniques" characteristic of each show that define the presentation style of the piece. These fantastical elements describe the show's presentation style, which in turn dictates the structure through which concept is introduced.

The importance of presentation style in describing structure leads to another controversial aspect of the concept musical. Because presentation is a key element in the definition of a concept musical, it follows that a concept musical is not fully realized unless it is presented to an audience. Kislán, for example, infers in the quote above that a concept piece is only fully recognized in production (the difference between a "musical show," featuring theme, and a "musical production," featuring concept [182]). According to this view the concept is in reality the realization of the unified vision of composer, lyricist, librettist, director, and designers, since

each of these creators contributes to the manner in which the piece is presented for an audience.⁷ It would be inconclusive, then, to analyze a concept musical from a strictly literary or musical perspective, because these elements have the potential to lend full identity to the piece only when it is presented for an audience.

This argument seems well founded based upon the aspects of the concept musical explored so far. It might be argued that no musical, or indeed no play, is fully realized until it is presented for an audience, but the concept musical is a special case in this respect since one of the elements that defines it as such is presentation style. In a plot-based musical or play, plot structure is articulated in its entirety before production; however, in the case of a concept musical, presentation style is only introduced, to be fully structured and articulated in production. A concept on paper does not do itself justice as a concept musical – in the case of *Cats*, for example, T.S. Eliot’s verse and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s music could not fully describe a concept until combined in production. The inference, then, is that a concept musical must be fully developed and produced in order to effectively communicate its concept.

Among those theorists that argue that a concept musical does indeed realize itself fully only in production, it follows that the production team also utilizes the concept as the driving force from the beginning to the end of the production process. That is, the concept, or reigning notion described jointly by the musical’s structure and theme, must serve as inspiration from the onset of the piece’s creation. This contrasts with the production of a plot-based musical, which begins with a driving plot onto which a director’s concept is superimposed during the rehearsal

⁷ Eugene Huber concurs in his dissertation, in which he lists the “eight characteristics developed to define and identify the concept musical” (269). Central to these characteristics are the roles of the director, who functions almost as “co-author” (270) and the set designer, who creates “an environment within which the musical’s theme is extended” (270-271). Both these aspects take on significance only when the show is produced.

process. Dan Cartmell refers to this factor as the point of inception, or “the point in time at which the concept comes into use... More conventional musicals begin with a script or libretto and musical numbers basically established at the start of rehearsals to which the director attaches a concept. A concept musical begins with a concept which then stimulates the writing, organization and style of the libretto and music...” (96). For example, during the production process for *A Chorus Line*, emphasis is placed on the overall concept of characters who are auditioning for positions in a dance chorus, representing those who have pursued careers in show business through the ages. Their specific stories are individual, but moreover they are representative of the mood of the life of the Broadway dancer, the concept of the musical itself; and it is this mood, rather than an individual focus on plot or character, which drives the piece from its conception to its realization on stage. Thus, point of inception dictates that the concept functions from the writing of the piece to its realization in production as the defining element that serves to synthesize all other aspects of the musical. As a result, the audience becomes enveloped by the driving idea that forms the concept, as it is reinforced by music, dance, speech, lyrics, plot, theme, design elements, and director’s vision.

Since the concept or mood of the musical serves as the source of overall inspiration in production, it has been widely debated how much emphasis story or plot should receive within the integration of a piece as a whole in order for the piece to remain a Concept Musical. Most critics and theorists agree that Concept Musicals should integrate music, movement, speech, and theme fairly equally throughout the piece; but they disagree extensively on the topic of whether plot should receive equal emphasis or indeed whether plot should exist at all. Martin Gottfried, who is often credited with being the first to apply the term “Concept Musical,” wrote that such a musical “is a show whose music, lyrics, dance, stage movement and dialogue are woven through

each other in the creation of a tapestry-like theme (rather than in support of a plot)” (McEntee 95). Gottfried thus infers that plot does not figure strongly within his definition of the Concept Musical. He cites Sondheim’s *Follies* as a significant example, since the musical is primarily a montage of memories, relationships, and the flavor of a bygone era. Scott Miller, however, writes that some Concept Musicals possess “a central concept that is most important but... still employ a linear plot (187). Thus, according to Miller, the plot, or book, of the musical may play a significant role in contributing to the concept.

Richard Kislán agrees that the concept musical may contain a plot, or “sequence of actions designed to bring out the drama in character, idea, and situation,” but he differentiates between “story” and “plot” as follows: “Plot does not mean story. Plot implies a specific chart of events; story implies the tale that is told (179). Kislán states that a plot is a sequence of actions that move the situation forward, while a story is a linear development of events, and that while a Concept Musical may involve a plot it does not incorporate a story. According to this definition, “story” implies a stronger cause-and-effect relationship between events than does plot; thus, a concept musical employs plot to advance situation, but causality is not as strong as it would be in a “story-based” musical. From an audience’s perspective, then, the production is relevant not as it reveals what happens next, but as it continually builds on the conceptual imagery presented.

At this point it seems that definitions of the concept musical become overly fastidious, requiring varying manipulations of the same terminology. Essentially, the main requirement remains that the overall mood, or concept, acts as the driving force for all elements of production and that those elements work in relatively equally distributed capacity to support the concept. Whether story or plot or both are present seems irrelevant under the condition that the concept drives both the production process and the audience’s experience. It would in fact be difficult to

describe a show in which no causal action takes place. (Even *Follies* can be said to possess a story based around four people who look for their pasts but rediscover one another in the process.) Thus, it seems a concept musical may employ a story or a plot in the same capacity as music, lyrics, movement, and environment on stage – to support the overall mood or *concept* of the piece.

To summarize, then, concept describes the identity, or “personality” of a concept musical, embodying a synthesis of universal theme and structure. Because structure plays such a prominent role in the realization of concept, the musical relies on a presentation style that defines its structure for an audience, making the concept musical a form that is only fully realized in production. As such, the concept musical follows its concept from beginning to end of the production process, resembling its predecessor, the integrated musical, in synthesizing music, dance, speech, plot, and theme to realize a unified whole.

Part Two: Sondheim’s Concept Musical

Through years of defining itself, then, the Concept Musical has evolved from shows such as Jerome Kern’s *Showboat* to the musicals of Rogers and Hammerstein to the creations of Andrew Lloyd Webber and others and finally to the work of Stephen Sondheim, who is considered by many to be the perfecter of the modern Concept Musical. According to Joanne Gordon, “*Concept*” was a “word coined to describe the form of the Sondheim musical,” (7) indicating that without the work of Sondheim, the term would have no reason to exist. Glenn Litten concurs that “conceptual musical” was “a term invented by journalists to characterize the unique style of theatre that since *Company*... Hal Prince had been staging” (332). Thus, Litten indicates that director Hal Prince, who worked with Sondheim on six of his major musicals,

found his first inspiration for the Concept Musical in Sondheim's *Company*. Richard Kislak, too, states that "the best examples of the concept musical have come from the creative collaboration of Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince" (254). Whether or not these statements are verifiable, they attest to the theoretical association of Sondheim and his director Hal Prince with the Concept Musical and lead to the question of why Sondheim's shows are constructed in such a way as to be considered the epitome of the modern Concept Musical, a form that has been finding its identity since the second quarter of the twentieth century.

As the perfecter of the modern Concept Musical, Stephen Sondheim has taken the criteria for this form of theatre to levels not previously explored. Sondheim's innovations include "pastiche,' 'collage' and other 'neoimpressionistic' forms..." as observed by Edward T. Bonahue, Jr. (171). Bonahue is referring to Sondheim's ability to incorporate influences from varying cultures (*Pacific Overtures*), time periods (*Follies*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*), and genres of entertainment (melodrama in *Sweeney Todd* and fantasy in *Into the Woods*) in his musicals. These varying references are significant because they embody Sondheim's technique of "borrowing" elements from history to find the inspiration for his conceptual foundations. That is, Sondheim has, to an unprecedented extent, incorporated artistic forms from varying historical periods to describe the universal nature of humanity. Consequently, the universal themes characteristic of the concept musical as defined above possess a more widely-reaching capacity in Sondheim's musicals – *Pacific Overtures* bridges a gap between cultures; *Follies*, *Sunday*, and *Forum* juxtapose the past with the present; *Sweeney Todd* and *Into the Woods* parallel legend and fairy tale with real life. As a result, Sondheim's developments in this area have been observed as being "neoimpressionistic,"

as quoted above, as well as “postmodern”⁸ and “deconstructive”⁹.” It becomes evident, even without an attempted definition of these theoretical terms here, that Sondheim introduces a perspective in his musicals that defines his work as uniquely contemporary. In addition to synthesizing music, movement, speech, plot, and theme as in the integrated musicals and concept musicals preceding his, Sondheim also synthesizes time periods, cultural and historical events, and varying artistic genres in his work.

“Pastiche,” for example, is a technique that Sondheim utilizes to borrow musically from varying genres and time periods. Pastiche refers to Sondheim’s integration of specific musical styles within a single musical, such as the waltz in *A Little Night Music* or circus and Latin rhythms found in *Company*, bringing together these varying elements of musical style to assist in provoking impressions of modern life. In *Company*, for example, the commentary centers on contemporary perceptions of marriage and partnering, utilizing a whimsical circus-like motif alternated with musical references to traditional rhythmic couples dancing. In *Into the Woods*, Sondheim utilizes mocking rhythms, mimicking ballads, and childhood chants to make a statement about the inevitably collaborative nature of human existence in constant conflict with the childish selfishness and greed that define so many of our actions. In drawing upon these various musical influences in his works, Sondheim juxtaposes the traditional and the contemporary, again lending a new level of emphasis to the presentation of universal themes discussed above as being characteristic of the concept musical.

⁸ S. F. Stoddard explores this view in his essay “Visions and Re-visions: The Postmodern Challenge of *Merrily We Role Along*” (187-198) as does Edward T. Bonahue, Jr. in “*Sunday in the Park with George* as Postmodern Drama” (171-186).

⁹ Stephen Banfield refers to deconstruction in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Form* (92).

Related to this unprecedented synthesis of historical elements to support an overall concept, Sondheim has taken the ironic juxtaposition of ideas within his shows to a new level. That is, in describing a comparison between cultures, time periods, and genres in his musicals, Sondheim often calls attention to the blatant contrasts between traditional and modern practice on a thematic level. According to Joanne Gordon, “the old forms, the well-loved styles [reincarnated by Sondheim] remind us of what the theatre can do and what society once was. The satiric lyrics inform us of what our lives now are” (10). Gordon infers that this combination of sentimental forms, such as the traditional music styles described above, with biting commentary on modern life serves to suggest thematic irony to an extent to which many audiences in the 1970’s were not accustomed. Among the jarring juxtapositions Sondheim introduces is a psycho-killer singing a love ballad to his razors (*Sweeney Todd*) as well as a group of presidential assassins harmonizing lyrics referring to the American dream (*Assassins*). Through Sondheim’s ironic juxtaposition of ideas such as these, traditional and often nostalgic images are lent new meaning within a contemporary context, prompting audiences to question the themes presented from new and often intellectually challenging perspectives.

In addition, the jarring nature of Sondheim’s ironic juxtapositions implies an unprecedented audience emotional reaction to the contrasts presented in his concept musicals. According to Joanne Gordon, the often shocking images such as those described above in *Sweeney Todd* and *Assassins* engage audiences in an emotionally cathartic experience, and in support of her opinion, she quotes Hal Prince as follows: “Who says to be entertained means to be tickled?... I think it’s more stimulating to be upset. I try to be a part of what I see. And I go to the theatre to see a little blood drawn” (5). One of the results of producing Sondheim’s musicals, it seems, then is the engagement of audiences emotionally as well as intellectually. In

synthesizing contrasting elements in this way, Sondheim seeks to take his audiences on an emotional journey, one that perhaps simulates the terrifying excitement of a well-designed haunted house or roller coaster, introducing bitingly ironic impressions of modern life in contrast to traditional practice as part of his exploration of concept within his work.

One other key element of the emotional intrigue associated with Sondheim's musicals lies in his development of character. Sondheim's characters possess a sentimentality and identifiable quirkiness that elicit empathy from their audiences; simultaneously, however, the same characters remain representative of human nature in an overall sense, supporting the universal nature of the Concept Musical as described above rather than demanding individual focus. A key element of this achievement centers upon Sondheim's technique of allowing his characters to discover themselves in the presence of the audience rather than describing themselves to the audience. Joanne Gordon quotes Sondheim as saying that other writers "write songs in which a character explains himself. This is self-defeating. A song should reveal the character to the audience, but the character does not have enough self-knowledge to describe himself in these terms" (11). Thus, Sondheim seeks to create characters with which audiences can identify emotionally during those characters' discoveries. When observing Sondheim's work, the audience is then able to follow the character through his/her self discovery process, sympathizing with the character and applying his/her individual learning experiences to a more comprehensive and universal understanding of contemporary life. In this way, then, Sondheim appeals not only to his audience's intellectual understanding but also to its emotional sensitivity. The characters in *Into the Woods*, for example, lead audience members in an understanding of the interdependency of human nature as they discover that "no one is alone." As audience members, we sympathize with the challenges these characters face and the lessons they learn; in

doing so we also understand those challenges as representative of a universal struggle.

Sondheim's characters, then, operate with his ironic juxtapositions to resonate emotionally and intellectually with audiences, introducing to the concept musical a complexity unique to work of this composer.

Sondheim, then, has developed what is currently considered the epitome of the increasingly sophisticated form known as the concept musical. His musicals, it seems, draw upon historical references to an unprecedented extent in order to introduce unique juxtapositions of cultures, time periods, and creative genres. In doing so, his works suggest enhanced levels of both intellectual and emotional engagement on the part of audiences. Sondheim creates his work to jolt his audiences emotionally and intellectually, yet to appeal to them on a comparatively advanced universal level. Hence, by the 1970's American musical theatre had entered what Ethan Mordden terms "The Age of Sondheim" (31). Through his original approach, Sondheim presents audiences with a unique prescription for the contemporary Concept Musical.

CHAPTER THREE: THE CONCEPT MUSICAL -- SONDHEIM'S TOTAL THEATRE

Stephen Sondheim's approach to the contemporary musical, through its utilization of diverse historical references, jarring juxtapositions, and depth of character to reach its audiences emotionally and intellectually, appears to be the type of work that offers audiences a "total theatre" experience, utilizing a term originated by the nineteenth century composer Richard Wagner. Several musical theatre analysts have referred to "Wagnerian" aspects in Sondheim's work and even defined Sondheim's concept musical as a contemporary realization of Wagnerian total theatre;¹⁰ but they have yet to analyze Sondheim's work in a Wagnerian context. A closer look at Wagner's theories of total theatre indicates more than a casual parallel and begins to lead to a unique approach to understanding Sondheim's work.

According to Wagner, the *gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total theatre," consists of a number of structural elements synthesized to construct a unified work of art. Specifically, it relies on the intrinsic elements of music, dance, poetry, and tone, which work in tandem to create an overall theatrical experience for an audience and are "by their nature...inseparable without disbanding the stately minuet of Art" ("The Art-Work of the Future" 780). Here Wagner addresses the various elements of art as they work together to form a coherent presentation. In referring to the element of dance, Wagner addresses all forms of character movement on stage, including walking, sitting, and gesturing, as William Ashton Ellis points out in his translator's note to "The Art-Work of the Future:" "It must be directly understood that by "Dance" Wagner does not refer

¹⁰ Joanne Gordon speaks of catharsis in Sondheim's work, stating that this concept "is not generally associated with the American musical theatre, although one happily applies the term to Wagnerian opera" (5). Also, Stephen Banfield observes that Sondheim's concept musicals "imply a kind of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*" (147).

to the Ballet, or anything approaching it; it is the grace of gesture and of motion which he sums up in this terse and comprehensive term” (95). Thus, “dance” according to Wagner refers to the aesthetic of movement in general onstage and will here be utilized interchangeably with what we now term stage “blocking,” or stage “movement”. Congruently, Wagner addresses the element of poetry, which embodies not strictly verse, but all forms of vocal expression on stage, which Wagner terms the “living word” (*The Art-Work of the Future* 138). To clarify, Wagner’s poetry embodies musical lyric and spoken interjection; it corresponds to speech and song in modern performance. Finally, music as Wagner defines it is self explanatory and refers to the same concept we understand as music today, embracing melody, harmony, rhythm, etc... On the most basic level, then, the Music Drama bears some resemblance to the concept musical as described in Chapter One, since it relies upon an integration of structural elements toward a common end – in Wagner’s case, the finished work of art and in Sondheim’s case, the concept of the musical.

More specifically, Wagner also refers to all three structural elements (dance, poetry, and music) as they are designed to appeal to an audience. That is, dance refers to actual stage movement rather than written stage directions; poetry refers to the spoken or sung word rather than the written word; and music is realized for the listener, not simply recorded on paper. According to Wagner these elements make up the “Drama,” or “Music Drama,” which is designed to be viewed by an audience. Housing live performance, the theatre becomes “the People’s show-place of the highest human art” (*The Art-Work of the Future* 159). Here, Wagner indicates his belief in displayed theatrical works of art for audiences to experience. By nature, then, Wagner’s Music Drama is a synthesis of elements of performance; and as such it is only fully realized in production, preempting the same characteristic in the concept musical as discussed in Chapter One.

In tandem with the synthesized elements of dance, poetry, and music, Wagner proposes the existence of the element of “tone.” Wagner writes that tone forms the heart of the work of art and that it unites the elements of dance, poetry, and music like the sea unites the continents: “her particular character is that of a fluid nature-element poured out betwixt the more defined and individualized substances of the other... arts” (The Art-Work of the Future 110-111 and 150). Tone, it seems, is an abstract notion that forms the cohesive bond describing the relationship among the other structural elements; in a sense it is the glue that holds those elements together, allowing them to form a whole. In fulfilling this unifying role, tone works as the defining element that establishes the identity of the work of art. In this way, tone suggests itself as a possible precursor to the similarly abstract notion of concept discussed in Chapter One. It was noted that Kislán defines concept as the essence of the musical, that which describes what the work *is*. Like Wagner’s tone, concept is not completely tangible, but it unifies the more tangible elements of the entire work in order to describe the work’s overall identity. Tone and concept, then, appear to embrace an equal level of abstraction; and both are intended to embody the identity of a piece as it is made up of the more concrete structural elements of movement, music, and speech, or as Wagner lists them, dance, music, and poetry.

On the surface, then, Sondheim’s concept musical embraces basic characteristics that may describe a parallel with Wagnerian total theatre. Concept, as described in Chapter One, appears to embody a notion similar to that of Wagner’s tone – both are somewhat abstract but serve to describe the identity of piece as a whole, whether that piece be a Music Drama or a concept musical. Also, both Sondheim’s concept musical and Wagner’s total theatre infer a strong integration of the structural elements of dance, music, and poetry not simply as they are outlined in writing, but as they are presented to an audience. These surface-level similarities

warrant a more detailed comparison of the works and theories associated with Wagner and Sondheim; consequently, the following analysis will address the works of these composers on the structural, emotional, and intellectual levels.

In beginning a comparison of the structural elements within the work of both Wagner and Sondheim, it must be noted that music plays the most prominent role in communicating the overall identity of both the Music Drama and the concept musical. According to Wagner, “Music [possesses] the unquestioned right of being the chief concern, the only leader of the drama’s ‘tone’” (“Opera Affirms the Separation of the Arts” 3); therefore, the structural development of the music itself becomes a defining factor in determining the identity of a musical production. Other elements, such as dance and poetry, take a lesser role to that of music while still supporting the defining relationship of music to tone. Sondheim concurs; when asked whether his identification with the painter Seurat, around whose work Sondheim composed *Sunday in the Park with George*, was primarily intellectual or musical: “...you know the point is music – whether it’s frozen architecture, or architecture is frozen music, it doesn’t matter – it’s about structure” (Mark Eden Horowitz 103). To Sondheim, then, utilizing the architectural metaphor, music describes the backbone of the entire piece, and it is the key building block of the piece’s structure. Music, for both Wagner and Sondheim, is the structural element that appears to play the most important role in defining the makeup of a work of art; and it will become evident that music plays a key role in describing both tone and concept.

Among Wagner’s techniques of musical structure are several that later became structural trademarks of Sondheim’s concept musicals, the most prominent being leitmotif. Leitmotif, or a repeating musical progression associated with a recurring mood or personality, is a technique that Wagner utilizes throughout his musical compositions as a means of constructing and

unifying a musical whole. Wagner describes his leitmotif as “a characteristic tissue of principle [musical] themes, that spread itself not over *one* scene only (as heretofore in separate operatic ‘numbers’), but *over the whole drama*, and that in *intimate connection with the poetic aim*” (“A Communication to My Friends” 369). The recurring nature of leitmotif, then, allows Wagner to structurally tie together otherwise disparate segments of his work, highlighting subtle through-lines of character, mood, or intellectual theme and thus contributing to the unification of the work as a whole, the “poetic aim.” Most of Wagner’s main characters can be identified through a corresponding leitmotif that reminds audiences of their motives, intentions, and roles within the drama, as proven by Thomas S. Grey’s extensive analysis of leitmotif in *Lohengrin*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Die Mastersinger*, and others (349-373). Grey quotes numerous critics’ observations of such leitmotif, including that of composer Franz Liszt, who describes the motif associated with the character Ortrud in *Lohengrin* as that “which winds its way throughout the opera like a poisonous serpent, now ready to coil about its victim, now fleeing from the sight of her holy champion” (219). Liszt observes the nature of this particular leitmotif, then, as it advances and retreats within the work, revealing individual character piece by piece. Wagner also chooses to represent entire social entities in this manner, as in the *Flying Dutchman*, where a recurring melody describes the presence of the people of Norway when the ship arrives at port. This motif is not only melodic but rhythmic, utilizing a repeating rhythm to signify the masses. In the same manner, in this work and in others, Wagner repeats specific harmonies as well. In all of these pieces Wagner’s recurring musical refrains, whether melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic, contribute to an overall tone that establishes the piece’s identity, a technique that has since become associated with Sondheim’s concept musical.

In discussing his utilization of this same musical technique, Sondheim asserts, “I’m very much a leitmotif man – I really like the notion that an audience will register certain tunes, or rhythmic ideas, or even harmonies, with given characters” (Mark Eden Horowitz 72-73). Thus, Sondheim utilizes melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic motifs as Wagner does to unify musically the entire work. Sondheim’s characters, from Sweeney Todd, to the Assassins, to almost all of the fairytale characters in *Into the Woods*, possess an identifiable melodic refrain that reminds audience members of their role in the entire works of art, relating again to the identity, or Wagnerian tone, of the piece. Regarding *Into the Woods*, for example, Sondheim developed a master sheet detailing the motifs associated with each character: “...I determined I was going to have a whole series of themes and then utilize them, so that’s what this sheet is” (Mark Eden Horowitz 81). Thus, Sondheim places emphasis on the careful development of his melodic motifs for each character. Harmonic and rhythmic motifs are important to Sondheim as well, as exemplified in his other works. In *Assassins*, for example, where the interaction of the characters from varying historical periods is particularly poignant, harmonic progressions are also repeated to emphasize this interaction. In *A Little Night Music*, which is written in three-quarter time, many of the motifs are dominantly rhythmic. Like Wagner, Sondheim also utilizes leitmotif to describe entire groups of characters, such as Bobby’s friends in *Company*, a fact that will become more relevant as we begin to discover the emotional and intellectual levels of comparison between the work of Wagner and Sondheim.

First, however, other structural elements may be noted in supporting such a comparison. Minor chord development, for example, is a technique that Wagner and Sondheim both explore extensively in their work in order to describe an overall tone or concept. Thomas S. Grey discusses Wagner’s utilization of a predominant minor key and its establishment of tone in Act

II, Scene 1, of *Lohengrin*: Friedrich's aria and the "concluding duo" conspire to "maintain a single tonic (F# minor) which establishes an overarching – if not continuously functional – tonality for the scene as a whole, justified by the continuity of scenic and psychic character: night-time, vengeful brooding, sorcery, and conspiracy" (216). According to Grey, then, these two pieces of music set a tone through the utilization of the dominant F# minor key – a key that appropriates through its minor quality the uneasiness of "psychic character" suggested by the conspiracy revealed within the storyline. Significantly, Wagner chooses a minor key in this instance to reinforce his intention of creating a jarring atmosphere, illustrating the way in which his utilization of the minor mode supports the fabrication of overall tone.

Congruently, Sondheim discusses his choice of minor modes in *Pacific Overtures* as a result of his research on Japanese musical style: "... I discovered that the Japanese seem to be about minor pentatonic... I thought, whether this is authentic or not, it makes a *big* difference. So I made a list here of various ways to utilize that" (Mark Eden Horowitz 161). Sondheim indicates that his research pertaining to Japanese music and his desire to establish a musical sound that was culturally authentic influenced his decision to write much of this musical in minor keys, or modes. In reflecting the traditional music of Japanese culture, Sondheim's musical choices lend the piece a specific atmosphere. As in Wagner's *Lohengrin*, the minor modes here describe an idea or mood that helps to form the identity of the piece. Like Wagner, Sondheim utilizes minor keys to lend character to his work, helping to describe the identity and thus the concept of his musical pieces.

Another structural element linking Sondheim's technique to that of Wagner is the intricate interlocking of musical phrasing with lyrical expression. Wagner sought to choose lyrics whose phonetic stresses would complement the stresses and rests in his music, again

supporting the need for a unified, expressive whole. According to Barry Millington, when Wagner's "musico-poetic synthesis is... at its most ingenious, interesting melodic lines register the finer nuances of the text with no unnatural word stresses" (27). In this way, the lyrics serve as an ideal compliment to the music and vice versa, emphasizing the importance of speech, or poetry, as a contributing factor within the synthesis of the structural elements that collaborate to describe the tone of the work. Sondheim utilizes this technique as well, explaining that "lyrics go with the music," and stressing the importance of "grace, affinity for words, a feeling of the weight of words, resonances, and tone" (Adler 44). Each syllable corresponds to a note of music, and each stress works in tandem with rhythmic beats, synthesizing phonetic and musical stresses and rests. Natural stresses, then, are important to Sondheim as they were to Wagner. Thus, structurally, several of Sondheim's techniques appear to recall those of Wagner, who stressed the importance of intricacy of lyrics as well as leitmotif and minor chord progression in an effort to contribute to the tone of the piece and thus present a unified work of art.

Operating as they do on the most fundamental level of comparison between the work of Wagner and Sondheim, the specific elements of structure discussed above lay the groundwork for a deeper comparison of the work of these two composers, on the emotional and intellectual levels. Both Wagner and Sondheim sought to communicate to their audiences emotionally and intellectually, and these efforts are reflected in a similar manner in the works of art as well as in audience reactions to those works. On an emotional level, Wagner expresses the idea that structure alone could not engage an audience, and that "*not the melodic Expression, per se, but the expressed Emotion* should rouse the interest of the hearer" ("A Communication to My Friends" 372). Thus, Wagner infers that the elements of musical structure discussed above, including leitmotif, minor chord progression, and melodic lyricism, are rendered irrelevant if

they do not somehow contribute to the establishment of an emotional mood expressed by the piece. Sondheim, discussing his own work, states that a musical must be entertaining or, in the case of *Sweeney Todd*, “scare an audience out of its wits” (6). Sondheim as well, then, is interested in providing an emotionally engaging experience for his audience. Thus, although the two composers differed greatly in their methods of describing the need for audience emotional experience, both articulated a basic need to engage their audiences emotionally. Interestingly, Wagner expresses deep admiration for Greek theatre and specifically the emotional catharsis that Aristotle related as necessary to good theatre. Regarding Greek drama, Wagner writes, “the deeds of gods and men, their sufferings, their delights... in all solemnity and glee” are realized on the stage (“Art and Revolution” 33). That is, the extremes of sorrow and happiness are experienced in the theatre, evoked through dramatic presentation. This bears some resemblance to the idea of the emotionally cathartic experience described in Chapter One as being characteristic of Sondheim’s concept musicals. Sondheim himself, in an essay regarding his development of *Sweeney Todd*, expresses admiration for the Greek play *Oedipus Rex*, due primarily to the “larger than life” emotional experience it offers (3). Both composers, it seems, have made reference to the dramatic work of ancient Greece as a source of inspiration; and both found the Greek emphasis on emotional engagement useful in their own work.

In evoking emotional response from an audience, then, and the structural elements discussed above once again play a significant role in both the Music Drama and the concept musical. Wagner utilizes leitmotif, for example, not only to unify the Music Drama as a whole, but also to suggest mood for his audience. He writes that “In these primary motifs -- ...being tangible impulses based on the emotions – the poet’s design becomes more intelligible and is realized through sense perceptions” (Brown 52). Thus, the poet’s (or composer’s), approach

becomes readable through the refrain (motiv, or motif), imparting a desired emotional response on the part of the audience, whose emotions are awakened through their sensory perception of the music. For example, in *Die Walkure*, Wagner fabricates a repeating musical pattern associated with the movement of Sieglinde on stage. H. E. Reeser writes, “It is clear that Wagner intended to illustrate musically Sieglinde’s ‘steeling in’ since he paraphrased the Sieglinde motif which had first appeared [earlier]” (140). The repeated melody links the parts of the piece that are associated with Sieglinde by imitating the character’s stealthy movement pattern, thus representing the mood of the character as part of the mood of the piece as a whole. Leitmotif associated with Sieglinde in this case stimulates an emotional feeling of suspense and withheld passion, which the audience can identify as characteristic of this particular Music Drama. Similarly, Margaret Inwood observes that Siegfried’s motif “recalls past events and emotions, as presaging future scenes” (121). According to Inwood, the character of Siegfried, like that of Sieglinde, is reflected through motifs that evoke related emotional responses on the part of audiences. In addition, Inwood states that this same motif can recall at various points emotional threads of hope, grief, and youthful idealism (121). Thus, even a single motif may suggest varying emotional references in Wagner’s work – as the character’s emotions change, so does the mood of his/her motif.

Sondheim also utilizes leitmotif to establish emotional response from his audience. When Sweeney Todd enters the stage, for instance, the audience hears the repeated refrain that introduced this character at the beginning of the play; and the refrain also recalls all the macabre and chilling sensory and emotional reactions that accompanied the audience’s introduction to Sweeney – the sensation that causes Hal Prince to “go to the theatre to see a little blood drawn,” as stated in Chapter 1. Sondheim achieves a similar effect in *Company*, where a circus rhythm is

constantly repeated to represent the fond nagging of Bobby's friends, who encourage him to get married as they have done. In this case, leitmotif allows Sondheim to recall for his audience the identifiable mood of simultaneous affection and annoyance that accompanies this type of nagging attention received from those we love, which, like the circus, is temporarily fun but can lose its allure quickly. Utilizing this repetition of mood through leitmotif, Sondheim appeals to his audience members' sympathy as individuals by allowing his characters and situations to represent universally recurring images in real life. Also, like Wagner, Sondheim varies the mood of a single motif within his work. Bobby's friends supply an ideal example, since at different points in the musical the circus-like motif becomes less nagging and more joyful or loving, and vice versa. According to Sondheim, "music doesn't have any particular literary context, but it does have the ability to stir a certain kind of emotion" (Mark Eden Horowitz 72). Sondheim is saying that audiences associate certain musical sounds with specific emotions, and he goes on to state that he adopts these sounds as leitmotif in order to "create suspense" (73). This allows leitmotif to assist in dictating the emotional development of the piece as a whole, as with Wagner's *Die Walkurie*, discussed above. Leitmotif, then, serves the function of recalling an emotional response that refers to the identity of the musical, much as it does in Wagner's music drama.

Like leitmotif, minor chord progression has served as an emotional stimulant for audiences of both Wagner and Sondheim. For both composers, minor chord progression is a repeated technique that creates a jarring feeling of harmonic discord, an effect which suggests an emotional sense of uneasiness in audience members. The examples of minor modes in *Lohengrin* discussed above illustrate this in Wagner's work, evoking a general feeling of uneasiness that reflects the events within the Music Drama: "The whole revolves around a single

Haupttonart [predominant key] (F# minor)... reflecting a governing mood of evil nocturnal brooding” (Grey 216). The predominant minor key, then, describes the sorrowful mood of the work in this instance, supporting the disconcerting emotional fabric that Wagner creates for this piece. Similarly, in *Die Walkurie*, Wagner utilizes a minor chord to illustrate Brunnhilde’s dramatic, revolting response to Siegmund’s inquiry as to whether or not he will find Sieglinde in Valhalla: “Brunnhilde’s negative response coincide[es] with a striking musical disjunction (V7 of E minor resolved deceptively to Eb [D#] minor 6/4)...” (Grey 231). The striking minor chord, or “musical disjunction,” reflects the emotionally heightened nature of the argument between these two characters, representing musically the ensuing turmoil evident in the plot. In Sondheim’s work, minor chords serve a corresponding emotionally evocative function. *Assassins*, for example, presents the audience with minor chord structures that are often as disturbing as its theme. While the Assassins harmonize onstage, the chorus of “American citizens” provides moaning backup support in a chilling minor key. Audiences, who do not want to identify with the harmonizing Assassins for intellectual reasons, are forced then to see themselves as the “American citizens” who are singing “off-color,” a particularly jarring emotional reversal caused by Sondheim’s use of the minor key in this instance. This structural technique, then, contributes directly to the establishment of audience uneasiness, causing responses such as that of an actor quoted by Matthew Gurewitsch in the *New York Times*: “You feel a connection with these people that you shouldn’t and don’t want to” (“A Shot at Greatness”). It may be noted that Sondheim himself denies that he makes a conscientious effort to explore minor modes: “It seldom occurs to me to write in minor keys...” (Banfield 273). Yet, those who analyze his utilization of minor modes infer the role they play in establishing emotional mood. Banfield, for example, observes an association of chromaticism with the

witch's spells in *Into the Woods*; the minor chords utilized in this case serve to evoke the unsettling emotional aura surrounding this character (395). Emotional uneasiness, then, is something both Sondheim and Wagner achieve through the development of minor chord progression in segments of their work.

Also indicating the existence of Wagnerian emotional development within the work of Sondheim is an emphasis on universal character development found in both composers' work. Critics of both Wagner and Sondheim have observed the universally identifiable qualities of their characters, and both focus on collective humanity in their work as a relevant contribution to stimulating emotional empathy on the part of the audience. A work of art is, according to Wagner, a "Universal-human" phenomenon, and as such it reflects the idea that "the very essence of the human species consists in the diversity of human Individuality" ("A Communication to My Friends" 277). Thus, the recognizable traits that define characters ("human individuality") are the qualities that lend these characters universal emotional appeal for an audience. Wagner's utilization of the word "universal" in this context recalls the thematic nature of the concept musical as discussed in Chapter One; the concept musical, in the vein of Wagnerian total theatre, prioritizes universal human themes above the exploration of specific stories. In accordance with Wagner's belief in the universal, most of this composer's works explore historical myths and legends (*Tristan and Isolde* and the entire *Ring Cycle*, for example). This resonates with Sondheim's choices of universally recognizable material for his concept musicals, such as the legend of Sweeney Todd and the traditional fairy tale stories addressed in *Into the Woods*.

Such references are made in both cases to encourage audiences to recognize the human qualities represented within the characters onstage. This human emotional recognition is offered,

for example, through the character of Sachs in *Die Meistersinger*, as Chappell White observes: “Sachs’ part in the great quintet is a meditation unheard by the others. It is his only admission of his love for Eva, his ‘beautiful morning dream,’ that he hardly dares explain... If the listener knows the words and applies the emotional mood to Sachs..., the quintet becomes the revelation of his personality” (124). Sachs’ thus comes to fully realize the emotional concept of love for Eva in the presence of the audience; according to White, the character’s lyrics thus serve to draw in the audience emotionally. This concept parallels Sondheim’s articulation, quoted in Chapter 1, of the importance of character revelation in the presence of an audience: a character’s song should “reveal the character to the audience” as the character makes his/her own discoveries, rather than merely “describing” what the character already knows about himself or herself. The surviving characters in Act II of *Into the Woods* also demonstrate this concept as they share their real-time realization that “no one is alone,” reaching to the audience to identify emotionally with this revelation. This reaching out has been noted by theorists such as Stephen Banfield, who reverts to critic David Patrick Stearns’ observation that the reality of the characters contributes to an “illustration of the show’s plea for universal brotherhood” (385-386). The idea of truthful characters that make discoveries and speak to the audience on the level of universal emotion, then, is a key element in the works of both Wagner and Sondheim. In tandem with the structural elements of leitmotif and minor chord development, character development works toward the prescription of audience emotional reaction to both the Music Drama and the concept musical.

As observed in Chapter One, however, both structure and evocation of emotion in Sondheim’s concept musical are intrinsically related to theme, and these elements work together to describe the musical’s concept, or identity. Therefore, the development of intellectual response as well as emotional response is a relevant part of Sondheim’s work, as Joanne Gordon

notes when she observes that “audience activity [regarding Sondheim’s musicals] is intellectual...” (8). Wagner similarly notes that, “In presence of the dramatic artwork, nothing should remain for the combining intellect to search for,” the goal being “an instinctive understanding of life” (“Essence of Drama Is Knowing Through Feeling” 5-6). Intellectual themes are relevant to Sondheim’s concept musical, it seems, as they were to Wagner’s Music Dramas a century earlier, and a comparison of the work of these two composers without the inclusion of intellectual elements does not thoroughly describe the resonance between their works.

In discussing this exploration of intellectual themes in the work of both composers, the structural elements discussed above, such as leitmotif, again become relevant. In *Die Walkurie*, for example, Sieglinde’s leitmotif inspires not only a feeling of mystery and suspense but also an understanding of the subtext of love, corruption, and deceit addressed within the thematic threads of the opera. According to Thomas S. Grey, “Wagner mobilizes the latent ambiguity of the term *Motif* to signify various interconnected phenomena: broad underlying themes or mythic tropes within the drama (the power of the Ring, its attendant curse, the sibling love of Siegmund and Sieglinde, the emotional prehistory of Tristan and Isolde...)” (319). Thus, leitmotif is a structural element that serves to reinforce an understanding of intellectual themes in Wagner’s works in addition to suggesting a cathartic emotional experience. This intellectual aspect was reflected in a 1951 production of the *Ring* at Bayreuth, as reviewer Ernest Newman observes: “Most of what is required in the way of tracking out subtle psychological nuances is done by the music” (Skelton 161). Newman goes on to describe the way in which the orchestra appeared to play the role of another actor in the piece, taking on a sort of narrator’s position by commenting musically, through leitmotif, on the thematic elements addressed within the action. In this way,

Wagner allows his technique of leitmotif to stimulate an intellectual response among audience members.

In a similar manner, the jarring and unexpected nature of minor chord progression contributes not only to an emotional reaction on the part of Wagner's audiences, but also to intellectual realization. In *Lohengrin*, minor chord development serves to contribute to the audience's understanding of the relationship between the characters Friedrich and Ortrud as follows: "...the force of Friedrich's rage pushes him, Osmin-like, outside his established tonal orbit from F# minor into a cadence in F minor... Ortrud brings him quietly and firmly back to his senses, and back to F# minor for their concluding duo" (Grey 221). The minor chords, therefore, signify the tension between the two characters, reflecting the inherent discord within their relationship; and the switch from F# to F and back again signifies the volatile nature of that relationship. In this way, minor chords speak to the audience in a manner that emphasizes nuances of character and the relationships established within the Music Drama.

Sondheim, like Wagner, utilizes minor chord progression as well as leitmotif as vehicles through which to reach a more thoughtful side of his audience, dealing subtextually with psychological themes in his work. Thus, the aforementioned leitmotif introduces not only jarring emotional responses among audience members but also jarring realizations. In *Sweeney Todd*, for example, repeating musical motifs constantly bring to mind images of revenge and insanity, embodied in the character of Sweeney, but representative of society as a whole. Similarly, the characters in *Company*, through the circus leitmotif discussed above, present audiences with an intellectual image of the state of marriage in modern society. Through such an image, Sondheim suggests the intellectual discoveries of these characters as they find their way through the alternating moments of blindness and lucidity that define their relationships. Finally, regarding

Into the Woods, Sondheim discusses this implication of the intellectual through the structural as follows: “I determined I was going to have a whole series of themes [leitmotif]... They all have little echoes of each other.” Sondheim goes on to explain that the similarities, or “echoes” describe the common longings of the characters – all of them have a wish that something were different in their lives, much like “real” human beings rather than fairy tale characters (Mark Eden Horowitz 81-84). This tends to suggest the thematic relevance of humanism and the importance of common dreams and desires. In all of these examples, then, the leitmotif encourages audience members to address thematic conflicts in addition to the emotional response described above.

Minor chord progression, as in the work of Wagner, serves an intellectual purpose here as well. As mentioned above, in the case of *Assassins*, the minor key suggests identification with those who assassinate presidents, a concept that contributes to a significant intellectual conflict within the minds of audience members. The disquieting nature of the minor chords sung by the choral backup against the Assassins’ harmonizing suggests the concept of viewing the Assassins as fellow Americans. This idea promotes not only a disturbing emotional sensation as described above, but also a disturbing intellectual choice for the audience to ponder. That is, the music offers identification with the assassins; however, it is debatable whether or not this identification is the correct intellectual choice. Sondheim’s utilization of minor modes in *Pacific Overtures* also carries intellectual weight, since minor modes recall a Japanese musical tradition, paralleling musically the thematic conflict of East versus West in this piece. Thus, structural elements for both Sondheim and Wagner serve to unify the work on an intellectual level as well as on an emotional level.

Another element that operates on an intellectual level of communication with the audiences of both Wagner and Sondheim is these composers' utilization of thematic irony within their work. In their description of universal themes within their work, both have expressed a need for ironic juxtaposition of conflicting ideas as a tool to point toward thematic relevance. Wagner, in fact, states that "the only form of Mirth which our public of today can understand, and thus the only form in which an underlying truth can appeal thereto, is that of Irony" ("A Communication to My Friends" 331) Thus, irony, according to Wagner, suggests thematically an "underlying truth" with which audiences can identify on an intellectual level. That is, audiences in Wagner's time were to learn about life through the ironic experiences of the characters onstage. In the Music Dramas, irony is most often explored through internal conflicts experienced by these characters, as Joseph Horowitz observes regarding *Tristan and Isolde*: "The dramatic scenario combines two contradictory narratives, the one healing, the other lacerating. Tristan has suffered a breakdown; he is suicidal and amnesic. Dredging up his past, he succumbs to paroxysms of delirium and clairvoyance. He attains a state of illumination, but the catalyst is a fathomless decent" (118-119). Ironically, Tristan does not realize the feasibility of his love for Isolde until he is on his deathbed. As a result, the contrasting ideas of delirium versus clairvoyance as well as illumination versus fathomless decent describe Wagner's utilization of thematic irony, illustrating Tristan's process of obtaining truth at a cost. Here, Wagner recalls once again to his devotion to the plays of ancient Greece, in which tragic heroes must reach their downfall as the cost of obtaining knowledge. Thus, Wagner moves intellectually beyond the simple love story, exploring irony as a method of communicating messages to his audiences regarding the elusive nature of knowledge in particular and life in general.

Sondheim's thematic irony operates on a similar level of contrast in his concept musicals. As discussed in Chapter One, Sondheim's ironic juxtapositions of imagery form one of the factors that cause him to be described as the perfecter of the concept musical. Like Wagner, Sondheim utilizes irony to communicate the nature of life and of the process of learning about life through internal character conflict. Sondheim acknowledges that "At least half of my songs deal with ambivalence, feeling two things at once..." (Gordon 11). His characters, then, must learn to resolve conflicting feelings, as does Bobby in *Company*, who ironically experiences a longing to share his life with someone along with a desire to retain the benefits of solitude. Another example of thematic irony occurs in *Sweeney Todd*: Sweeney, like Tristan, attains new knowledge – the fact that his wife was not dead as he had thought; by this time, however, he has already unknowingly killed his wife, and it is too late to apply his new knowledge. Ironically Sweeney's quest for revenge has already caused his wife's death, and all is lost – like Tristan, Sweeney pays a price for his knowledge. Again, Sondheim's reference to Oedipus as inspiration during his development of *Sweeney Todd* becomes relevant – like the ancient Greek character, Sweeney finds in his new knowledge only his downfall. As in Wagner's work, the main character's final lucidity only dictates his ultimate blindness, reflecting a similar examination of irony in the tragedies of ancient Greece. Both the ancient Greek play and *Sweeney Todd* utilize ironic contrast to reflect thematically similar contrasts in life and the value of understanding in a world full of contradictions.

Significantly, the use of irony within the work of Wagner and Sondheim suggests other similarities between the themes explored in their work. The idea of the price of knowledge regarding *Tristan and Isolde* and *Sweeney Todd* is one common theme; however, there are more widely-encompassing themes regarding the nature of society found in both composers' work.

Both Wagner and Sondheim, in fact, stress thematically the importance of a cooperative society, and they both articulate the inherent ironic cynicism of a society in which such cooperation does not exist. In his essays, Wagner refers to the necessity of the *Folk*, that is, the unified societal whole, and its common *Need*, that for which individuals should strive to benefit all of society. Utilizing ancient Greece as an example, Wagner states that “when *all* men cannot be *free alike* and *happy* – all men must *suffer alike* as *slaves*” (“Art and Revolution” 51). Thus, happiness for the individual cannot be achieved unless the common goal of societal happiness is attained. This reflects Wagner’s belief that Germany during his time was not as unified and cooperative as it should have been; too many German people worked toward selfish goals and not the benefit of the collective whole of society. Wagner thus stresses the communal nature of humanity, with emphasis on working for the common good rather than egotistically-motivated goals, and he points to this theme, utilizing ironic cynicism within his Music Dramas.

For example, according to M. Owen Lee, who analyzes the parallels between Wagner’s *Ring Cycle* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, *The Ring* is a work abounding with such social commentary and citing the cynicism of a non-cooperative society: “[Wagner, like Eliot,] saw Western Civilization as headed for disaster: he ended his four-part drama about the Nibelungs with a world-destruction myth that was not part of his sources.” While he does not clearly articulate his belief regarding the cause of this destruction, Lee does go on to cite Wagner’s references in the work to Buddhist teachings, inferring the importance Wagner placed on preserving society by diminishing the ego in favor of the common good (48-49).¹¹ Significantly, it is the greed and selfishness of the characters in the four-part Music-Drama that lead to the

¹¹ Owen refers to Eliot’s direct quotes from Wagner’s operas, *Tristan and Isolde* and *The Ring*. Significantly, during Wagner’s composition of *The Ring*, he discovered Buddhism and Schopenhauer and the associated ideas of community in support of the common will of society.

destruction of society. Similarly, in *Lohengrin*, Elsa's selfish curiosity to know her lover's name despite the warning not to ask results in the disappearance of her lover forever as well as her own broken-hearted destruction. Again, in this piece, the triumph of egotism over common good causes disaster for all society, and ironically, especially for those attempting to get ahead. Thus, Wagner's works embody this irony in a reflection of the composer's lucid perception of the drawbacks of egotism in a social environment and the need for an understanding of the goal of common good.

Sondheim also discusses in his works themes of the necessity of community. In *Into the Woods*, the surviving characters learn the importance of working together for the common good only after experiencing near-nihilism at the hands of a giant who kills most members of their society. They clearly articulate their newfound knowledge in the song "No One Is Alone." Referring to this song, Sondheim states, "I think the final step in maturity is feeling responsible for everybody. If I could have written, 'no man is an island,' I would have. But that's what 'No One Is Alone' is about'" (Gordon 309). Sondheim, then, understood and articulated in this piece the elements of community that Wagner emphasized. The same theme is present in *Sweeney Todd*, in which the title character's overwhelming selfish need for revenge leads to the death of those he loves and ultimately to his own destruction. According to Joanne Gordon, Sweeney "becomes greater than any individual, yet less than human, a god of wrath corrupted by his own righteousness" (253). This character demonstrates again Sondheim's messages to his audiences regarding the collective nature of humanity, an idea also explored extensively in Wagner's Music Drama.

It begins to become evident, then, as we compare the work and theories of Wagner and Sondheim, that the contemporary composer utilizes certain elements of structure, emotional

catharsis, and intellectual theme that recall those applied by his nineteenth century predecessor. The elements of movement, music, and lyrics that compliment one another and share an interrelated purpose within the concept musical are reflective of similar elements in Wagner's total theatre. Concept and tone, while products of disparate time periods, appear to describe a similar abstract quality that defines the identity of a work of art. Meanwhile, other characteristics often noted within the work of Wagner, such as leitmotif, minor chord progression, intricate lyricism, universal character development, emotional catharsis, irony, and collective themes are now commonly attributed to the work of Sondheim. While it is probably a stretch of the imagination to argue that Sondheim is a "modern Wagner" based on these observations, it does seem reasonable to assert that Sondheim's concept musicals do in many ways embody *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total theatre, as Wagner described it.

Based upon this comparison, I would also argue that a contemporary approach to the concept musical may be enlightened somewhat through an application of Wagner's theories of audience perception. According to Wagner, the existence of total theatre as a unified whole should create a specific experience for an audience, one that relies upon the emotional elements discussed above to stimulate the intellect. He writes as follows:

In the drama, we become *knowers* through *the feeling*... therefore, an action can be explained only when it is vindicated by the feeling; and it thus is the dramatic poet's task, not to invent actions, but to make an action so intelligible through its emotional necessity that we may altogether dispense with the intellect's assistance in its vindication" ("Essence of Drama is Knowing Through Feeling 6").

In Wagner's view, then, an audience's intellectual response to the drama depends upon its emotional response. Full understanding cannot be achieved on the part of audience members

unless they have first been touched emotionally, so it is the emotional response that assumes priority; and the intellectual messages will inevitably take effect. According to this theory, audiences tend to approach the Music Drama from a position of sympathy, or emotional identification, with the characters; through this emotional involvement, they are then stimulated to thought.

All of the examples described above can be said to speak to this idea. For example, in *Tristan and Isolde*, if audience members do not feel some emotional identification for Tristan in his plight of despair, then they do not fully understand this plight. Similarly, if audience members do not feel an emotional connection to the characters in *The Ring*, then neither apply appropriate intellectual weight to the threat of these characters' destructions. Ultimately, if spectators do not care about the characters in a work of art on any emotional level, they cannot fully comprehend those characters' experiences.

Sondheim, for his part, has not clearly articulated this relationship between the emotional and the intellectual reactions of his audiences, but he has indicated his dedication to both, as shown above. Joanne Gordon assesses Sondheim's approach to the effects of his work on his audiences as follows: "Sondheim... is committed to didactic theatre, but... [he] recognize[s] that didacticism must never become overpowering nor unentertaining" (4). Thus, Sondheim appears to give priority to the emotional involvement, or entertainment, of his audience over his delivery of an intellectual message, although he does not deny the importance of such a message. Like Wagner, Sondheim appears to aim first for an emotional response, followed by an intellectual one. It remains to be seen regarding Sondheim's concept musicals whether the emotional response causes the intellectual response, but given the above similarities between the approaches of the two composers, it seems possible to apply Wagner's theory of "emotionalizing

of the intellect” (“Essence of Drama Is Knowing Through Feeling” 5) to Sondheim’s work.

Before concluding that Wagner’s theories on the emotion and the intellect describe an appropriate method of interpreting Sondheim’s work, however, it is necessary to address some of the key elements that make the work of Sondheim different from that of Wagner.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE WAGNERIAN APPROACH TO THE CONCEPT MUSICAL

There are key characteristics within the work of Sondheim that, despite the observations articulated in Chapter Two, may be perceived as “anti-Wagnerian.” As a contemporary composer, Sondheim has inevitably drawn from artistic theories and practices that succeeded Wagner, some of which originated as a reaction against Wagner’s ideas of total theatre. Deconstructive elements and elements of Brechtian alienation, for example, have been noted and analyzed as characteristic of Sondheim’s work; both of these terms describe phenomena that post-date Wagner and that appear to act against the unifying and emotionally engaging elements discussed in Chapter Two. Ultimately, however, an analysis of contemporary theories regarding deconstruction and audience perception reveals that the defying elements within Sondheim’s work do not preclude a Wagnerian approach.

Sondheim, Wagner, and Deconstruction

Deconstruction is a term that critics have associated with certain aspects of musicals by Stephen Sondheim and that Sondheim himself has described indirectly in his work. Definitions of deconstruction as a theory relating to theatre have occupied entire chapters, and it will be impossible to address more than a minute aspect of deconstruction here, and only as it relates to contemporary criticism of Stephen Sondheim’s musicals. The particular aspect of deconstruction that applies is the tendency of a work to reevaluate its own origin from preexisting data, including myth, legend, and aspects of traditional story-telling. From this perspective, deconstruction addresses themes and stories that originate from within a historical context and questions their validity within a modern context. According to Mark Fortier, who provides a

simplified, yet well-articulated analysis of this aspect of deconstruction, Derrida¹² states that deconstruction involves becoming “suspicious of the traditional concepts of history” (67). Thus, a work that “deconstructs” is often one that addresses concepts (stories, themes, characters) of previous origin and approaches them from a “suspicious” perspective, thus stepping outside the historical realm of these concepts and reevaluating their original purposes from a modern point of view. Fortier cites David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* as an example, since it embodies a retelling of a previous work (Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly*) from a modern perspective, one that questions the validity of various concepts and themes presented in the original work. Significantly, the emphasis shifts from the love story presented in *Madame Butterfly* to a reversal and reevaluation of that love story within the context of contemporary views regarding cultural and gender stereotypes in *M. Butterfly*. Through the introduction of this contemporary perspective, *M. Butterfly* may in this sense be said to be a “deconstruction” of Puccini’s opera.

This aspect of deconstruction as it applies to the work of Sondheim may be found primarily in pieces such as *Into the Woods*, in that it is a modern study of traditional fairytales, and *Sunday in the Park with George*, which is based loosely on the life of the famous painter George Seurat, evaluating this figure’s life from a contemporary point of view. Similarly, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* addresses farcical scenarios previously related in Ancient Rome by Plautus; however, it offers its audiences the opportunity to question these scenarios from a modern perspective. Stephen Banfield observes: “Farce... revel[s] in the artificiality and playing along with the genre is of course only a first step toward Sondheim’s later deconstruction of it” (92). Here, then, Banfield observes that Sondheim imitates Plautus’

¹² Jaques Derrida is the theorist whose name is most often associated with the theories of deconstruction, and it is his writing that forms the foundations of most analyses of various aspects of deconstruction.

farce; he also utilizes the word “deconstruction” to suggest Sondheim’s commentary upon Plautus’ original piece. He first states that Sondheim “plays along” with the farce, employing farcical elements including the use of over-the-top, or “artificial” situations, to reflect the work of Plautus. He then refers to “Sondheim’s later deconstruction” of the style of farce, addressing the composer’s technique of introducing his audiences to his farce from a modern perspective. For example, songs such as “Comedy Tonight,” “Everybody Ought to Have a Maid,” and “Love Is in the Air” question the style of farce as it describes life in Ancient Rome as opposed to life today. For example, “Comedy Tonight” prefaces the farcical elements to come by blatantly listing them for the audience, while “Everybody Ought to Have a Maid” and “Love Is in the Air” question in a tongue-in-cheek manner how Ancient Roman views of issues such as freedom and love may differ from modern views of those same issues. Sondheim thus appears to compose these numbers with the intention not only of imitating farce, but also of poking fun at it. In composing in this fashion, Sondheim calls attention to the fact that ideas addressed in such a farcical manner, such as freedom and love, may possess different connotations in today’s world. Lois Kivesto states, for example, that “[librettist] Shevelove felt that although the emphasis on Pseudolus’ desire for freedom in *Forum* was ‘extremely un-Roman’ (qtd. in Zadan 68), it was used for stronger relevance to the modern audience” (36). Kivesto is noting Sondheim’s sensitivity to the idea that the Ancient Roman slave would not perhaps have viewed freedom in the way modern audiences do; Pseudolus then becomes an agent for the analysis of freedom from a modern perspective. The approach Sondheim utilizes is in keeping with Plautus’ style but it also suggests a questioning of ancient themes from a modern perspective. Banfield phrases this observation in this way: Plautus’s plays... rel[y] on stock responses... The heady and frantic mixture with which *Forum* climaxes its chase routines is a more modern development”

(93-95). Thus, Banfield describes Sondheim's farce as being more "heady," or thought-provoking, than the pieces upon which it is based; modern audiences will not engage in the "stock responses" of Ancient Rome. Thus, rather than simply reproducing the Ancient Roman farcical style for modern audiences, Sondheim structures *Forum* in such a way as to invite his audiences to recontextualize Ancient Roman concepts of freedom of love through farce from a modern point of view.

Similarly, in *Into the Woods*, Sondheim imitates the traditional fairy tale through his characters of Cinderella, Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, the Baker and his Wife, and others, all based upon their original namesakes. He takes deconstructive liberties with the original stories, however, when his characters interact freely (despite their origins in different stories) and then find their loved ones and their worlds ultimately destroyed through the actions of the Giant. Sondheim thus requires once again that his audiences step outside the world upon which the original fairy tales are based and to view this world within the context of their knowledge of the world today. Ultimately, in *Into the Woods*, the fairy tale world does not hold up from a modern perspective, where themes of humanity and collaboration come into play. As a result, in discussing just one aspect of the traditional themes called into question in this musical, that of romance and marriage, S. F. Stoddard states that "[Sondheim's] stories operate to deconstruct the romance of wedded bliss" ("Happily...Ever... 'NEVER: The Antithetical Romance of *Into the Woods* 210). Stoddard goes on to describe Sondheim's subversion of the traditional fairy tale ending, "happily ever after." The word "deconstruction," then, is utilized again, this time pertaining to Sondheim's questioning of the fairy tale world from a modern point of view.

A similar purpose is demonstrated in *Sunday in the Park with George*, through the way in which this piece chronicles the artistic development of a historical figure, the painter George

Seurat. Significantly, the nineteenth century artist who is the main character in Act I is paralleled physically, emotionally, and spiritually by his modern alter-ego in Act II. In this way, the original character (from Act I) is allowed to relive his life in a modern context (in Act II), once again demonstrating Sondheim's technique of questioning historical elements from a modern perspective in his work. Edward T. Bonahue describes the George of Act II, "the contemporary George," as the character that "affords different insights into the idea of the artist, offered from the more familiar context of the twentieth century" (174). Thus, the George of Act II offers to modern audiences a lucidity regarding the life of an artist that the George of Act I cannot offer. Bonahue compares the two manifestations of the same character as follows: "Whereas the artist of the first act holds fast to his principles,... his second-act descendent here reveals that success actually depends on 'politics,' on negotiations of cultural power" (175). That is, the George of Act I cannot survive in the modern world of art without becoming the more manipulative main character found in Act II, just as the fairy tale characters in *Into the Woods* cannot survive when removed from their individual stories and forced to coexist in a more humanistic world. Here again, Sondheim's work appears to feature an element of deconstruction, analyzing and questioning the position of a historical character from a modern point of view.

Based upon the analyses above, it seems that the elements of deconstruction found in the work of Stephen Sondheim ultimately lead audiences to find new meaning in previously explored themes and stories. In *Forum*, the audience is forced to reevaluate the ancient farcical approach to such themes as freedom and love, while in *Into the Woods* the audience must recontextualize traditional fairy tale characters that appear to have abandoned the traditional fairy tale. Finally, in *Sunday in the Park with George*, the audience must reevaluate the role of the

artist in society based upon the differences between the George in Act I and the George in Act II. Thus, in Sondheim's musicals, there is significant weight lent to new points of view as they apply to previously addressed concepts. This quality in Sondheim's work can be seen more clearly in contrast to the work of his predecessors, including Rodgers and Hammerstein. In the work of this writing team, for example, the overall intellectual approach to the themes presented is not a "suspicious" one as described above; it does not question the validity of those themes. Instead, the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein present a single perspective regarding the main ideas presented, and they reinforce this perspective throughout the work. The audience is given a clear image of positive and negative forces at work within each character with no room to question that image from differing perspectives. Billy Bigelow's drinking in *Carousel*, for example, is a negative force contributing to the awkwardness of his relationship with Julie Jordan. Although Billy may be considered a multi-faceted character, Rodgers and Hammerstein leave no room for doubt which aspects of this character are positive and which are negative from any perspective within the musical. Sondheim's writing, in contrast, does not offer such clear-cut conclusions. Significantly, in *Forum*, freedom is achieved at a price; the concept of freedom is neither wholly positive nor wholly negative, but complex and open to analysis and questioning within the context of an ever-changing modern world.

An important technique that Sondheim utilizes in order to achieve the deconstructive approach as discussed above is that of pastiche, that is, the technique of borrowing musical styles from varying time periods and cultures and utilizing them within a single musical. In *Forum*, for example, "Comedy Tonight" possesses elements of early twentieth century vaudeville through its presentational style, listing in vaudevillian fashion what types of entertainment the audience may expect while watching the piece. Meanwhile, "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid" is, in the

words of Martin Gottfried, “the only old-fashioned showstopper that Sondheim would ever write” (Kivesto 41), hearkening once again to a traditional musical style, that of the “showstopping” chorus number of the turn of the century musical revues. Through his utilization of such musical references, Sondheim reminds his audiences of theatrical presentation styles throughout history, offering them a frame of reference against which to place the Ancient Roman farce from a modern perspective. Sondheim achieves a similar effect in *Company*. Although this musical is not designed around a fairy tale or historical plot, it does address the age-old theme of relationships, asking audiences to assess the meaning of relationships in a fast-paced modern world. Jim Lovenshire provides an analysis of the varying musical styles Sondheim utilizes in *Company*, analyzing references to the foxtrot in “Side by Side,” the waltz in “Someone is Waiting,” and Latin Rhythms in “Ladies Who Lunch” (183). All of these musical references suggest the dynamics of relationships as represented by couples’ dances, and they call to mind evolving approaches to relationships as they can be seen to reflect the changing trends in couples dancing. Through pastiche, then, Sondheim musically explores varying historical approaches to the same concept, constructing a musical background against which modern audiences might recontextualize the concepts explored.

This idea of suggesting modern commentary on themes and styles previously explored may appear to conflict with the notion of the concept musical as total theatre, since by its very nature this somewhat deconstructive technique requires that audiences “remove” themselves from their involvement in the piece in order to recontextualize the ideas presented. That is, the complications Sondheim introduces by analyzing traditional stories and themes from the “suspicious” point of view described above may tend to undermine the neatly developed synthesis of structural, emotional, and thematic elements described in Chapter Two. A three-

book study completed at Stanford University by Mary A. Cicora, however, demonstrates that this “suspicious” approach does not completely contradict Wagner’s approach. As noted in Chapter Two, Wagner emphasizes the importance of audience intellectual response to the theatrical work presented, and it will become evident that Wagner also encourages his audiences to question from their own perspectives the ultimate meaning of traditional themes and stories presented in his work. In fact, Cicora utilizes the term “deconstruction” with regard to Wagner’s work in much the same manner that Sondheim’s critics apply the term to his work. Significantly, Wagner dealt with previously related myths and legends, including the stories of gods related in *The Ring*, the legend of Tristan and Isolde, and the legend of the seafaring Dutchman in *The Flying Dutchman*. Wagner does not simply retell those stories in a foreground of fantasy and spectacle; rather, it will become evident that he deliberately questioned in his Music Dramas the traditional themes and stories with which he dealt, revealing in his work the specific aspect of deconstruction discussed above with regard to Sondheim. According to Cicora, “the theory of... deconstruction is based on the assumption that texts are simply not secure in the referentiality” (18). That is, as discussed above, an existing text (or story or legend) does not present reliable references as it stands in its traditional form; it must be approached “suspiciously” and reevaluated within the present context. Cicora goes on to state that “One can tailor the theory of Derrida to formulate a theory that describes a specifically Wagnerian kind of mythological-legendary deconstruction... Wagner clearly intended to form new myths by using elements of traditional myths in his music-dramas... Wagner’s works, because they form new ‘myths’ or stories out of elements taken freely from traditional mythology, are what one could describe as ‘second-order myth’” (19). Thus, according to Cicora, Wagner’s Music Dramas suggest new meaning (embodied in “new myths” or “second-order myths”) through their questioning of

traditional myths, much in the deconstructive vein discussed above with regard to the work of Sondheim. In this way Wagner appears to have actually preempted Sondheim's somewhat deconstructive technique of questioning stories and themes that originate from historically distant sources.

Based upon Cicora's findings, then, it seems that Wagner's works do not strictly imitate the mythical stories upon which they are based. Instead, as "second-order myth," Wagner's works may be broken down to comment thematically on the traditional myths, just as Sondheim's works comment on traditional farce (*Forum*), traditional fairy tales (*Into the Woods*) traditional views of the artist's role in society (*Sunday in the Park*), and traditional images of coupling and marriage (*Company*). As discussed in Chapter Two, Wagner's ending of the *Ring* Cycle in world destruction is not a part of the original myth; rather, it is a nineteenth-century thematic commentary upon the conflicts related in the original myth. Significantly, suggestive of Sondheim's fairy tale characters, the characters in Wagner's *Ring* cycle could not ultimately survive when removed from their mythical world and placed in the more realistic world familiar to Wagner's audiences. Thus, Wagner's intent was not to simply present a mythological structure, but also to stimulate commentary on that structure from a "modern" nineteenth century perspective.

Wagner, in providing such commentary, allows his characters to comment upon their mythical counterparts, much like Sondheim's Seurat provides commentary on his alter-ego when he is reincarnated in Act II. According to Cicora, Wagner's characters are allowed the ability of some-what omniscient self-evaluation. She writes that characters "such as Senta, Elsa, Isolde, Tristan, and Gurnemanz incessantly relate, retell, or reinterpret stories (which are often their own extratextual past history or the prehistory of the drama they are playing out onstage)." Thus,

these characters operate on two levels – one being the level of the myth from which they originate and the other being the level of nineteenth century commentary upon that myth. Cicora concludes that the Music Drama “eventually deconstructs the motley concoctions consisting of pieces of legendary or mythological raw material that Wagner has put together” (19). Cicora is saying then, that Wagner lends his characters the dual role of participant within the myth and commentator upon the myth. When characters such as Tristan and Isolde recount their past, they do so from an omniscient perspective, contributing to Wagner’s commentary upon their role in the myth as a whole and how it may be viewed from a nineteenth-century perspective. Cicora also utilizes the Dutchman as an example, arguing that “as Senta is conscious of his own legendary existence, so is the Dutchman, strangely enough, aware of his own paradoxical split reality” (49). The Dutchman, preempting in this sense Sondheim’s *Seurat*, exists per se in two realities, with the modern reality providing outside commentary on the historical. Wagner was at least as interested in historical perspective as he was in mythology,¹³ as his characters clearly demonstrate. These characters, then, constantly question their historical origin, asking to be reevaluated within a modern context.

As Cicora explains, Wagner utilizes the irony within his work (discussed in Chapter Two) in his music dramas to suggest a sort of tongue-in-cheek historical analysis of the myths with which he deals. She writes that “Wagner’s music-dramas have, in particular, a Romantic irony with regard to their mythical raw material” (15). That is, Wagner’s irony acts as a tool through which the traditional myth at hand becomes reevaluated from a modern perspective. The irony of Tristan’s discovery of his love for Isolde on his deathbed, alluded to in Chapter

¹³ Cicora explains this concept as a paradox typical of Wagner’s work: “all [music-dramas] show a dichotomy of mythology and history, that is, mythological raw material and historical reflection upon its meaning, which actually propels the dramatic action” (14-15).

Two, serves as an example. According to Cicora, Tristan at this point “becomes increasingly clairvoyant to the metaphorical, literary-artistic, textual nature of the work of art in which he exists” (136). That is, on some level the character of Tristan reveals an awareness of his role in Wagner’s modern myth. The realization or “clairvoyance” he gains regarding his love for Isolde within the mythical story at this point stimulates his realization that he is more than a simple manifestation of the original myth upon which Wagner bases his Music Drama. Tristan at this point describes two entities – the mythical figure upon which the work is based, and the nineteenth-century dramatic character that he embodies for Wagner’s audiences. As a figment of both the myth and the nineteenth century Music Drama, Tristan can ironically no longer survive in the world of the myth (predating the similar fate of Sondheim’s fairy tale characters), and he becomes the embodiment of a commentary on the myth itself from a nineteenth century perspective. The result of this is, in Cicora’s words, that the myth “destroy[s] itself deconstructively” (127-128). In commenting on the very legend upon which it is based, then, *Tristan and Isolde* argues the non-feasibility of the existence of such a legend in a nineteenth century context.

Irony, then, serves the element of deconstruction in the work of Wagner by lending new meaning to the myths explored in the Music Dramas. As stated in Chapter Two, irony is also characteristic of Sondheim’s intellectual approach, and it is possible that Sondheim’s irony, like Wagner’s, contributes to his somewhat deconstructive commentary on the legends or stories upon which he bases his work. In this sense, the irony of Sweeney Todd’s discovery of truth regarding the beggar woman’s real identity as his wife directly preceding his own destruction may suggest, like Tristan’s discovery, Todd’s ultimate understanding that he is not only the main character within an ancient legend, but a twentieth century embodiment of that character. As a

modern commentary upon the original Todd, Sondheim's Todd can no longer survive in the mythical world onstage, and the piece consequently ends with the ensemble pointing into the audience to indicate the existence of Sweeney Todds everywhere.¹⁴ Like Wagner, then, Sondheim appears to apply irony in such a way as to suggest the type of deconstructive contextualization discussed above.

Finally, while it has not been observed that Wagner utilized musical pastiche, there is evidence that the nineteenth century composer borrowed from multiple mythical sources in a single work of art, preempting Sondheim's technique of borrowing from numerous musical styles. Cicora cites *Tannhauser* as a main example, stating that "*Tannhauser* was the first drama in which Wagner combined elements of various myths and legends to form his own modern, synthetic, or 'second-order' mythology" (61). Thus, Cicora now utilizes the term second-order mythology to refer to the "new myth" that is created when story elements of numerous legends are combined within one Music Drama. Cicora goes on to describe the poetic references as well as the combination of historical and fictional characters addressed in *Tannhauser*, pointing to Wagner's technique of drawing upon these varying sources in order to fabricate a modern myth that comments somewhat deconstructively upon the original. For example, the character of Tannhauser himself is based upon a historical figure that achieved mythical significance through the centuries. Meanwhile, as Cicora explains, the song contest featured in this Music Drama originates from a legend of uncertain origin, while the characters other than Tannhauser also embody figures of varying German historical and mythical origin (61). Cicora's study reveals similarly varied origins and references within the other Music

¹⁴ As Joanne Gordon observes, "Sondheim has the company move downstage and confront the audience, implying that there are Sweeneys here, now and always" (250). Sondheim thus drives home for his audiences in this manner the modern commentary based upon the ancient legend.

Dramas; it becomes evident that Wagner often borrows from numerous sources within a single work. This technique of “borrowing” from multiple myths and legends suggests a sort of “mythical pastiche” that could be said to form a sort of foundation for Sondheim’s technique of musical pastiche. Both provide a foreground through which myths, legends, and previously-told stories can be reevaluated to suggest new meaning for modern audiences, exemplifying the element of deconstruction described above.

Thus, Wagner, who has historically been associated strictly with the idea of synthesis and unification of elements within his work, has been noted to incorporate elements of deconstruction as well. It may be argued that in order to achieve this technique Wagner compromises the emotionally engaging total theatre experience he proposes to create for his audiences by encouraging them to step outside the music drama in this way, but he does not completely sacrifice those techniques, as we have seen in Chapter Two. Again, Wagner argues that the creation of emotional sympathy for characters occurs first within audience members; it then opens the door for intellectual understanding supported by the type of deconstructive commentary discussed above. Wagnerian total theatre, then, can be shown to embrace the aspect of deconstruction that allows it to comment upon the myths and legends on which it is based. It follows, therefore, that similar deconstructive techniques observed in the work of Sondheim do not preclude a Wagnerian approach on the part of the modern composer.

A return to Wagner’s idea of “emotionalizing the intellect,” however, creates another problem regarding the comparison between Wagner and Sondheim. Many of Sondheim’s critics argue that his work is not emotional but rather alienating, much in the vein of the work of Bertolt Brecht.

First, the basis of Brecht's alienation theory, or *Verfremdungseffekt*, infers a lack of emotional empathy on the part of audience members. Brecht wrote that "the artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience" and that the audience should be "hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play" (454-455). Brecht, then, articulated the belief that there should ideally be very little audience empathy with the characters on the stage, and many of Sondheim's critics have expressed the notion that productions of Sondheim's musicals successfully embody this Brechtian absence of empathy, or alienation effect. Thomas P. Adler quotes Emanuel Azenberg as one such critic, "who finds shows like *Company* and *Follies* 'soulless' [and] attribute[s] a dose of Brechtian alienation or estrangement to Sondheim's musicals" (40). Azenberg thus finds such musicals to be devoid of emotional content to the point of being cold and nihilistic. John Lahr concurs: "Sondheim's glib toughness echoed the mood of the unromantic era. He became a phenomenon new to the Broadway musical: a laureate of disillusion" (Gordon 17). Lahr's opinion, then, is that Sondheim's work lacked warmth, particularly the joy and hope embodied in earlier American musical theatre, reflecting an era of despair that pervaded during the time of Sondheim's writing.

All of these observations are well-founded to an extent and are based in educated analyses of Sondheim's work. It cannot be denied that Sondheim's musicals contain elements of cynicism. *Company* and *Follies*, cited above, call attention to the dark side of relationships, aging, and the passing of time. *Assassins* blatantly asserts the idea that presidential assassination is a fact of modern society and not a random element of misfortune. *Into the Woods* portrays the deterioration of a fairy tale society whose participants are well-meaning but uncollaborative. Because of their treatment of such themes, all of these shows reflect what has often been

interpreted as a lack of humanity, a characteristic that often inspires a comparison of Sondheim with Brecht.

In keeping with this idea, analysts have observed what they interpret as Brecht's direct influence upon Sondheim's work. Joanne Gordon states that Sondheim's musical number "The Advantages of Floating in the Middle of the Sea" from *Pacific Overtures* "is probably influenced by 'The Song of Commodity' in Brecht's manifestly didactic play *The Measures Taken...*". Gordon goes on to analyze the song's references to Japanese societal hierarchy and its lack of humanity to the point of its being "ephemeral and unreal" (181), a technique that Brecht also utilizes to alienate his audiences emotionally in order to call attention to messages of social didacticism. Similarly, Thomas P. Adler states that the character of Mrs. Lovett in Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, "fed solely by profiteering on the misfortunes of others, seems deliberately intended to recall Brecht's Mother Courage" (42). Here again, Adler is inferring that this character's elements of coldness and inhumanity recalls a Brechtian characterization. Finally, Ann Marie McEntee notes in her essay on Sondheim's *Follies* that Hal Prince utilized directorial techniques borrowed directly from Brecht's essay, "Street Scene" (96). There is thus strong evidence that Sondheim's work has often acquired identity through a Brechtian influence, thus validating the observations of many critics that productions of Sondheim's musicals often demonstrate Brechtian alienation.

The question remains, then, whether or not the kind of Brechtian alienation found within the musicals of Stephen Sondheim can co-exist with the notions of the emotionally engaging Wagnerian total theatre discussed in Chapter Two. According to Brecht, the two cannot co-exist: "So long as the expression *Gestamtkunstwerk* (or 'integrated work of art') means that the integration is a muddle, so long as the arts are supposed to be 'fused' together, the various

elements will be equally degraded, and each will act as a mere ‘feed’ to the rest” (450). Brecht states that Wagner’s unification of elements within a work of art, including music, words, intellectual themes and emotional mood, precludes the concept of audience alienation, which requires a separation of elements in order to impart Brecht’s desired effect of surprise upon his audience. Modern theatre theorists and analysts of audience perception, however, indicate that this may not be true and that indeed Brechtian and Wagnerian elements may co-exist within a single work of art.

It is first pertinent to state that Sondheim himself does not identify fully with Brecht. While he does not deny that many of his pieces embrace Brechtian elements, he states that didacticism is not as important for himself as it is for Brecht, and that audience emotional involvement takes precedence over Brecht’s alienation effect in Sondheim’s musicals (Adler 40). In addition, as noted in Chapter Two, numerous critics disagree with those quoted above, citing unprecedented emotional intensity in Sondheim’s work. However, because so many have located specific elements of Brechtian technique within his work, the issue of Brechtian elements as they affect the Wagnerian aspects of the concept musical is worth analyzing.

First, Brecht makes it clear in his later writing that his theory of alienation does not describe a complete lack of emotional participation on the part of his audiences. He writes that “neither the public nor the actor must be stopped from taking part emotionally... Only one out of many possible sources of emotion needs to be left unused, or at least treated as a subsidiary source – empathy” (Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* 173). Thus, according to Brecht’s own articulation, emotional engagement on the part of audiences should not be eliminated; it should merely not go so far as to allow audiences to empathize strongly with the characters onstage. Empathy, according to Brecht, causes audiences to compromise their

identities by imagining themselves as the characters they are viewing. Empathy thus distorts audience perspective, interfering with audiences' abilities to accurately evaluate the scenarios onstage; laughing, crying, and other emotional responses on the part of audiences (and actors), however, are compatible with Brecht's theory. Thus, Brecht's alienation theory does not preclude all emotional response on the part of audiences, a fact that indicates that his criticism of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* rests more upon Brecht's choice of terminology than his complete abdication of emotion within the theatre.

Congruently, theorist Hilda Meldrum Brown proposes that the ideas of Brecht and Wagner are in reality not as disparate as modern practitioners assume and that Brecht, in arguing against Wagner's premise, was expressing distaste toward a theory he had merely heard about and did not fully understand. Brown finds that "there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that Brecht had ever read Wagner's essays and it would seem more likely that his notions of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* were culled entirely from secondary sources" (73). Thus, Brecht's understanding of Wagner was possibly very limited, and Brown goes on to suggest that Brecht's theories, in responding against a very basic and incomplete image of Wagner's writings, actually parallel Wagner's ideas in many instances.

To begin, Brown links the production of Brecht's alienation effect directly with his theory of separation of elements within a work of art, referring to "'trennung' [separation]...(with its strong disjunctive and anti-empathetic implications and its practical application in the 'Verfemungseffekt' [alienation effect])" (80). Thus, separation of elements, one of the key factors in denoting Brecht's theories from those of Wagner, causes decreased audience empathy resulting in alienation of the audience from the events on stage. Alienation then, relies upon separation of elements. However, Brecht also wrote (published in his collected

works in 1967), “So let us invite all the sister-arts of drama, not in order to create a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ in which they give in and are destroyed, but so that, along with the drama, they promote the common task in their various ways” (79). Thus, although Brecht eschewed the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, he proposed, as Wagner did, that the disparate elements of a work of art should work toward a unified goal, or “common task.” Brecht’s statement in reality appears to bear resemblance to Wagner’s statement that “the three primeval sisters [dance, tone, and poetry] whom we see at once entwine their measures wherever the conditions necessary for artistic manifestment have arisen” (“Art-Work of the Future” 95). Thus, Brecht seems to agree that no matter how different they are, the “sister arts” must ideally collaborate at some point within the development of a work of art, simply because they strive toward a common goal. Consequently, if the elements of art must strive toward a common goal, the alienation effect appears weakened, since it relies upon a separation of elements.

Several theorists and critics support this conclusion through their questioning of the alienation effect. Brown concludes that there is a “lack of evidence” (99) supporting the alienation theory and that the logic Brecht applies in support of its existence relies upon a “battery of comparatively superficial theatrical devices” (107).¹⁵ According to Brown, then, separation of elements to a significant extent is unattainable in a single work of art because, as Brecht himself states, all elements must work toward a common goal. This synthesis seems to preclude the existence of the alienation effect, since commonality of elements tends to elicit audience emotional empathy, as Brown infers above.

¹⁵ Interestingly, Brown discusses a parallel between Brecht and Wagner based upon Brecht’s extensive use of Wagnerian leitmotif, discussed in Chapter 2.

This conclusion is supported by critical responses to productions of dramas by Brecht, most notably the audience reaction to the debut of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. When the play debuted in 1947, critics reported that audience members were moved to tears in response to the title character's death, despite Brecht's efforts to present Mother Courage as a cold, unsympathetic woman who epitomized the most inhumane aspects of the war effort. Thus, although Brecht strove to avoid or lessen audience empathy, audiences identified with Courage at least to some extent as a human being who suffered herself from the treacheries of war. Courage has been shown to be a character capable of promoting a somewhat empathetic sensibility among audience members, as a victim of the war in the play and not merely a perpetrator. Although this fact does not necessarily support a parallel between Brecht and Wagner, it does weaken the argument that the ideas of these two theorists describe completely opposite goals.

It seems then, from several perspectives, that Brecht's alienation effect and its related concept of separation of elements within a work of art are not achieved to a complete extent in his work. In fact, Brecht himself concurs that it is necessary for the elements of a theatrical presentation to compliment one another to a certain extent and for audience members to engage in some form of emotional reaction to that which is presented on stage. Thus, Wagner's idea of "total theatre" appears to function within the theatre of Brecht, albeit at a most basic level. In addition, some modern analysts find that even the word "empathy," to which Brecht objected intensely, may be applied to his work. Such an analysis from a cognitive point of view comes from Bruce A. McConachie, who writes that spectators of live theatre engage in "empathetic projection" ("Doing Things with Image Schemas: The Cognitive Turn in Theatre Studies and the Problem of Experience for Historians" 581). According to McConachie, this means that

spectators tend to project themselves onto the characters they are watching onstage, i.e. putting themselves “in the characters’ shoes.” Spectators tend to imagine themselves as the characters, encountering the challenges that the characters encounter and experiencing the corresponding emotions, a natural form of empathy on the part of the spectators. At a recent conference, McConachie spoke of the ways in which this natural tendency toward empathy on the part of audience members applies to productions of Brecht’s plays, concluding that the empathy and resulting emotional engagement of audience members precludes the alienation effect (*Theatre Symposium*). In fact, McConachie expressed the idea that the most immediate audience reactions to spectacle on stage are naturally empathetic, leading to an emotional response; it is only later that audiences react intellectually to the themes Brecht presents. This returns us to the previously discussed parallel between Brecht and Wagner, who, as we know, articulated the idea of “emotionalizing the intellect,” or utilizing an audience’s emotional response as a bridge to the intellectual.

It appears, then, that several theorists have noted parallels between the seemingly disparate theories of Brecht and Wagner regarding audience response. Therefore, observations of Brechtian techniques within the work of Sondheim do not preclude a Wagnerian approach to the work of this composer. An example exists within the critiques of the original New York production of *Sweeney Todd*. Reviewers such as Howard Kissel found the piece to resemble the work of Brecht, citing emotional alienation and strict social commentary in what they interpreted as “post-Brechtian theater” (*Women’s Wear Daily* 3/2/79). In the same review several paragraphs later, however, Kissel sums up his impressions as follows: “*Sweeney Todd* is not just a musical – it is total theatre, a brilliant conception and a shattering experience.” It seems, then, that audience members can observe Brechtian alienation and Wagnerian total theatre within the

same piece – *Sweeney Todd* demonstrates that emotional catharsis and intellectual stimulation can be seen to go hand in hand, as Wagner dictates.

Despite comparisons to Brecht and theoretical analyses of deconstruction in Sondheim's work, then, it is possible to conclude that Sondheim's audiences become "knowers through feeling" ("Essence of Drama Is Knowing through Feeling" 6), as Wagner articulated the intended reactions of his audiences. Both Wagner and Sondheim place emphasis first upon stimulating emotional catharsis within their audiences, and second upon communicating an intellectual message. Consequently, critics of the productions of Wagner and Sondheim alike have expressed similar reactions. Regarding Cosima Wagner's production of *Lohengrin* in 1908, Bernard Shaw wrote, "Here you have a piece of stage management of the true Wagnerian kind, combining into one stroke a dramatic effect, a scenic effect, and a musical effect, the total result being a popular effect the value of which was proved by the roar of excitement which burst forth as the curtains closed in" (Skelton 92). Here, Shaw found audiences moved to a level that elicited a vocal reflection of the emotional response stimulated by Wagner's total theatre experience. Similarly, regarding the Kennedy Center's production of *Sweeney Todd* at the Sondheim Celebration in 2002, Laura Hanson writes that "it is impossible not get caught up, with goose bumps no less, particularly during the last twenty minutes of the show... The spectators had no choice but to jump to their feet even before the actors came on for their curtain call" (Hanson 336). Thus, Sondheim's audiences, like Wagner's, have found themselves moved to a high and vocal state of emotional excitement. Later, when the emotion subsides they analyze the work on an intellectual level, as did reviewer Clive Barnes: "Todd was here not merely a bloodstained grotesque, but a victim of injustice and a casualty of class war" (*New York Post* 3/2/79). As Sondheim desired, intellectual messages were present in the piece, but they did

not take precedence over emotional stimulation. As Wagner articulated in the title to his essay, “[The] Essence of Drama is Knowing Through Feeling,” a stimulating emotional experience leads to a stimulating intellectual experience – in the Sondheim’s concept musicals as well as Wagner’s total theatre.

Brechtian alienation in the work of Stephen Sondheim, then, does not negate the possibility of comparison between Brecht and Wagner. It seems that theorists have argued that “alienation” in its purest meaning does not necessarily exist even within the work of Brecht. That is, as Brecht himself articulated, elements of a work of art must strive at least to some extent toward a common goal, and audiences will naturally experience some emotional response to the characters and action on stage. Thus, while Brecht and Wagner have historically been viewed as embracing opposite approaches, it seems that elements of alienation and total theatre can co-exist to some extent. It appears, then, that in incorporating Brechtian elements within his work, Sondheim does not negate the elements of total theatre already discussed in his musicals.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Wagner's total theatre is an entity toward which the concept musical has evolved throughout its development during the twentieth century, epitomized by the musicals of Stephen Sondheim. Born from the integrated musical, featuring a synthesis of the elements of music, speech, and movement presenting a unified story, the concept musical grew to embody a similar synthesis, emphasizing a universal mood or thematic idea rather than a story. The abstract idea of *concept* became the determining feature of this type of musical's identity, and because the concept embodies all aspects of presentation to an audience, the concept musical can only be fully realized in production. By the 1970s, Sondheim engaged in a development and synthesis of structural, emotional, and intellectual elements that worked to describe his musicals' concepts at an unprecedented level in production. As a result, pastiche, intricate character development, and irony became synonymous with Sondheim's brand of musical theatre.

Sondheim begins his interaction with his audiences by stimulating them in their experience of emotional catharsis, taking them on a scintillating journey through the relationships and challenges of characters that are universal, yet uniquely identifiable. Sweeny Todd, Mrs. Lovett, the Assassins, and the fairy tale characters of *Into the Woods* are all examples of the startling embodiments of human nature Sondheim creates to occupy the stage. Emotional stimulation is only the first level of audience appeal, however; Sondheim also tackles complex intellectual themes in these same musicals, which deal with topics of industrialism, social injustice, and social responsibility. The experience Sondheim creates is indeed a total one, addressing the emotional and the intellectual and dealing with characters that embody universal traits.

Epitomizing integration, then, Sondheim's concept musical appears to beg comparison with Richard Wagner's ideal of synthesis among the arts. It is this general idea of synthesis and total theatre, stimulating audience involvement on both the emotional and the intellectual level, which suggests to me a general parallel between the approaches of these two composers. Upon further analysis, more specific points of comparison emerge, such as both composers' utilization of leitmotif, minor chord development, and intricate lyricism in order to appeal to their audiences emotionally and intellectually. Both Sondheim and Wagner also utilize irony frequently within their work, and both tend to offer social commentary dealing with the drawbacks of selfish egotism and non-collaboration in a world populated with people from various backgrounds. It is perhaps these details that have caused passing reference to Wagner in numerous contemporary analyses of Sondheim's concept musical.

Other analyses, however, deviate from the basic ideas of integration and emotional catharsis previously noted in Sondheim's concept musicals, instead indicating Sondheim's inclination toward a deconstruction of artistic elements and a reflection of Brechtian alienation within the work of the contemporary composer. Recent analyses of the nature of deconstruction and Brechtian alienation, however, indicate that these observations do not weaken a theoretical comparison of the work of Sondheim and Wagner. Indeed, Wagner himself, through his engagement in outside commentary and presentation of multiple perspectives regarding the mythical tales he addresses, has also been shown to utilize some elements of what is known in contemporary theory as deconstruction. In addition, contemporary theoretical comparisons of Brecht and Wagner indicate more evident similarities between the two than are traditionally assumed.

Thus, it seems that the Wagnerian approach to music drama is one that can indeed be applied to the concept musicals of Stephen Sondheim. The question that remains, then, is what does this mean for contemporary audiences and critics of Sondheim's concept musicals? The answer is one that requires a reliance on the Wagnerian breakdown describing the relationship between the emotional and the intellectual experiences of the audience. According to Wagner, beneficial intellectual realization only results from a successful emotional catharsis on the part of the audience. Congruently, I would argue that a concept musical by Sondheim is best received when the spectator first allows himself or herself to be swept up in the emotional journey Sondheim presents. As shown, this appears to be Sondheim's intent and it is also the basis of Wagner's theory of "emotionalizing the intellect." Most of Sondheim's musicals, as we discovered in Chapter One, operate on an exaggerated, tongue in cheek level. *Sweeney Todd*, for example, is a myth presented in horrific proportions; *Into the Woods* is the embodiment of ironic humanism (presented through fairy tales) to the nth degree; and *Company* is a satiric look at marriage in the late twentieth century. All of these musicals embrace their exaggeration and irony as a tool first and foremost to move audiences to laughter and tears. Only after the emotional experience is over is it necessary or appropriate to address the intellectual themes presented on a more serious and realistic level.

It is my argument, then, that the critics of Sondheim who find his work cold and lacking in emotional sensitivity make the mistake of looking first for intellectual stimulation and therefore not allowing the emotional elements to first affect them on a tongue-in-cheek level. Regarding *Sweeney Todd*, for example, as a strictly intellectual piece is a choice likely leading to repulsion toward the work as a whole as cannibalistic, completely devoid of any hope for human nature. The resulting sense of nihilism indicated by critics discussed in Chapter 3 is a natural

outcome of this type of serious intellectual approach. It is also this approach that causes these critics to label Sondheim as a purveyor of an outrageous inhuman sensitivity. Among other critics, who allow Sondheim's outrageous choices to find outlet first in emotional catharsis, Sondheim's intellectual messages are understood from a more realistic perspective.

Wagner's theories, then, offer insight into the concept musicals of Stephen Sondheim. The works of both composers apply the idea of total theatre, allowing emotional catharsis and resulting in intellectual stimulation among audience members. Thus, as today's audiences view musicals such as *Sweeney Todd*, *Company*, and *Into the Woods*, a Wagnerian approach may lead to successful understanding – one that relies upon a strong emotional experience.

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