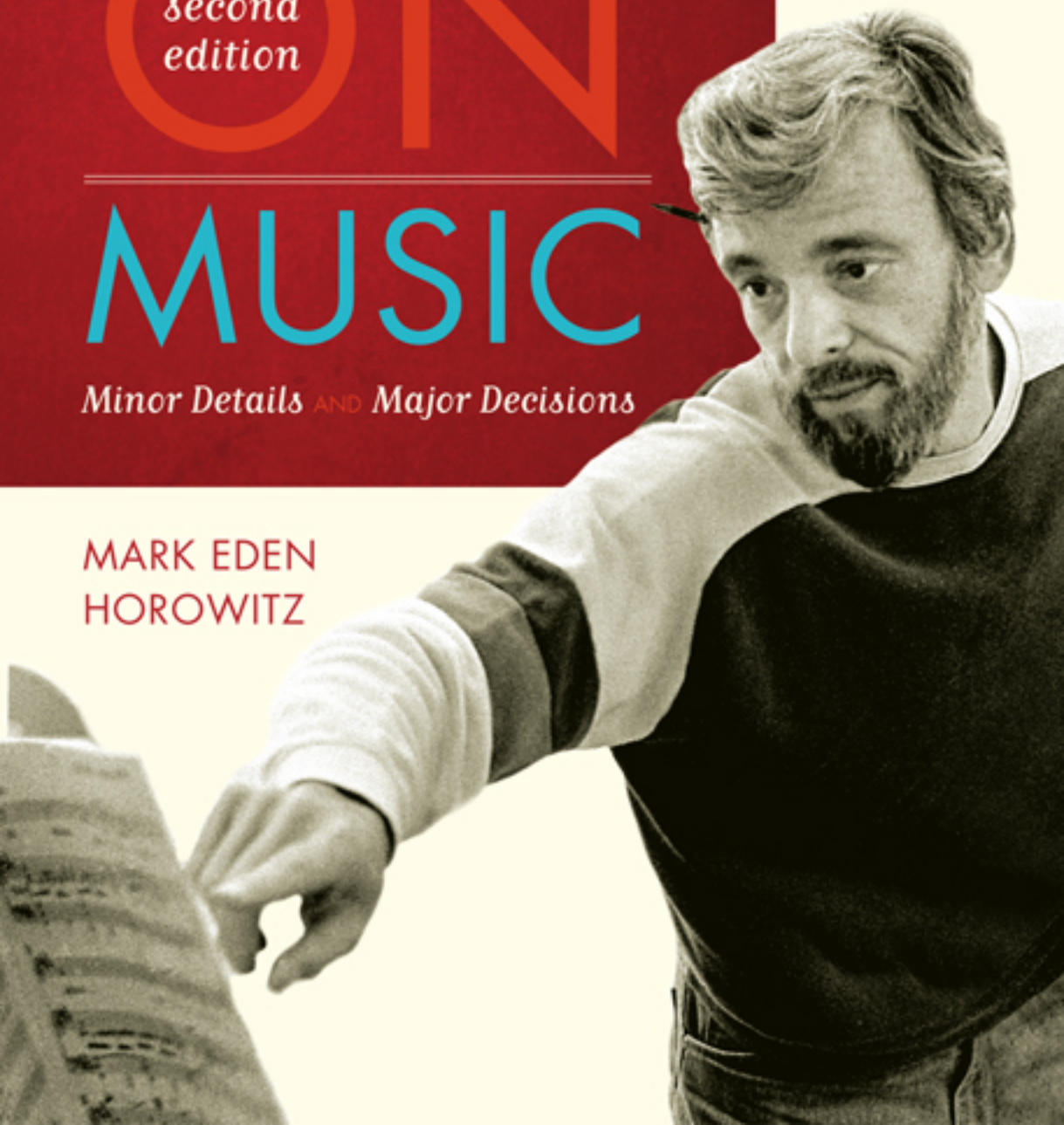
SONDHEIM ON MUSIC

second edition

Minor Details AND *Major Decisions*

MARK EDEN HOROWITZ



Sondheim on Music

Minor Details and Major Decisions

Second Edition

Mark Eden Horowitz

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Preface to the Second Edition

Stephen Sondheim became my teacher long before we met. His work taught me about psychology, behavior, history, language, ambivalence, and irony. It helped me understand the world, gave me a vocabulary to discuss it, and provided music to accompany it and add emotional depth. The work itself was also an example of the notion that art is most effective when coupled with craft. Given the opportunity to interview Sondheim, I became his actual student, though I thought of myself as a surrogate for whoever might someday have access to the interviews in one form or another.

This second edition of *Sondheim on Music* features two new interviews with Sondheim. Unlike the first set of interviews, which had not been conducted with any intention that they would be published, I hoped from the beginning that these would be, and the most recent interview was done specifically for this edition and is its primary justification. Combined, they add about sixty percent to the interview portion of the book. The "Song Listing, Discography, and Publishing Information" section has also been updated and expanded.

The first new interview focuses entirely on the show *Bounce* (2003), which subsequently found its final form in the significantly altered *Road Show* (2008). The interview was conducted to inform an article I was writing for *The Sondheim Review* on the show's evolution and birth. Based on the real-life Mizner brothers, *Bounce/Road Show* has a long and complicated history. Sondheim first considered musicalizing the story in the early 1950s, but abandoned the project when he learned that Irving Berlin was working on a musical on the same subject—a show that never materialized. When he took up the idea again, it was first realized as a reading

at the New York Theatre Workshop in the fall of 1999 under the title *Wise Guys* (directed by Sam Mendes). Work progressed slowly, until the show, now named *Bounce*—and directed by Harold Prince—had a limited run at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in the summer of 2003. After a hiatus of a couple of months, that evolving production opened for a limited run at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in the fall of 2003.

In preparation for my article and the interview with Sondheim, I attended the production in Chicago and exchanged emails with him about that version. I also conducted interviews with John Weidman, the show's author, and Jonathan Tunick, its orchestrator (a frequently rescheduled interview with Prince never took place). The interviews with Weidman and Tunick informed my interview with Sondheim, and excerpts from all three interviews were included in the article. I also attended the *Sitzprobe* in Washington on October 16—a rehearsal where the musicians and cast play and sing the show together for the first time (held in this case, as is typical, in a rehearsal hall)—and saw the second preview on October 22. The interview with Sondheim took place on the afternoon of October 29 in his rooms at the Watergate Hotel, and the show opened the following evening.

It had always been my hope that the interview with Sondheim would someday be published in full, but it has taken several years for that to happen. The *Bounce* version of the show was not well received and failed to reach Broadway as its creators had hoped. After some time, Sondheim and Weidman returned to work on the show, to a degree reverting to an amalgam of earlier versions combined with the New York Theatre Workshop one, now with John Doyle as their collaborating director. I first approached Sondheim about publishing the complete interview in 2006, but as he was already in the throes of reworking the show, he felt his comments about the earlier version were no longer relevant; I think he also feared that publishing it then might confuse or mislead. So I let the matter drop. After the show reached its final approved version under the title *Road Show*, I reexamined the earlier interview and, though the show was indeed different, much of the score remained the same, and Sondheim's comments struck me again as not only instructive and fascinating, but unusually revealing about the process of putting a show together. Of all the interviews I've done with Sondheim, this is the only one to catch him in the middle of working on a show, which gives his responses a rare immediacy. And since a commercial cast recording was made of the *Bounce* version of the score, readers can follow this interview with that recording. In November 2009, I asked Sondheim again whether I could include this interview in this book, and after a quick reread he said yes. At the time he was working on his own book, and my sense from his response was that

he particularly appreciated the value of an interview that was contemporary with the work being discussed.

When Scarecrow Press asked if I was interested in working on a second edition of *Sondheim on Music*, my immediate thought was, only if Sondheim would agree to a new interview. A comment I had received repeatedly from readers revealed some frustration that the book only focused on Sondheim's later shows. There was a reason for that (explained in the original introduction), but it seemed this was an opportunity to at least partially correct that imbalance. Also, Sondheim, ever the generous teacher, always gave me the benefit of the doubt in our initial interviews, saying things like, "As you know . . . " or simply assuming that I did. The reality is (I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit) I didn't always immediately understand or appreciate the significance of everything he said. A new interview would be an opportunity to follow up on some of our earlier discussions, and, I hoped, benefit from a clearer understanding of how Sondheim worked.

He agreed to a new interview in January 2009, and we ultimately scheduled it for the afternoon of May 13, again in his New York home. Preparing for the interview, as I had the first time, I solicited input and suggestions from several musicologists and musicians. This time, presumably because people now had a better sense of the notion behind the interviews, I received many responses. I also received additional scans of some of his manuscripts from his archivist, Peter Jones.

This new interview, here titled "Encore," is in some way the mirror image of the initial interviews. Those sessions worked backward from Sondheim's then most current show, *Passion*, going as far back as a chapter on *Pacific Overtures* (1976). For reasons that mostly escape me now, I skipped over *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981). (I'm not sure it was entirely conscious, but I think I was concerned that Sondheim's experience with that show had been so disappointing that I feared upsetting him.) This new interview works forward from Sondheim's first Broadway show as composer and lyricist, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962) and, with a bit of skipping around, even touches on his latest work, *Road Show*. Of course there are tangents, so not everything is strictly chronological.

After transcribing the interviews and performing some modest editing, I sent them to Sondheim for his comments and corrections. In addition to a few specific corrections and clarifications, one telling suggestion he made was, "You might comb out a few redundancies." I've tried to do that, but it is a painful task. One of the things I like about these transcripts of interviews is that they reveal a mind at work. One reader pointed out to me how often Sondheim begins a response one way, only to immediately begin the process of refining and rethinking his answer, sometimes

to the point of coming to an opposite conclusion. The fact that he puts so much thought and internal debate into his responses will, I hope, make readers take them that much more seriously.

The expansion of the "Song Listing, Discography, and Publishing Information" has mostly been in the discography. Not only have there been many new recordings of Sondheim works since the initial edition of this book was published, but recent Internet and other resources have provided hundreds of additional citations for earlier recordings or reissues that were missed. Readers should be warned that inaccuracies abound at some major Internet sites (particularly where programs seem to automatically assume that identical song titles indicate identical songs), but with the benefit of audio clips and other clues, I have attempted to verify and correct all entries.

When I conducted the original interviews with Sondheim, I had no idea that they would one day form a book, and when the book became a reality I assumed its primary readership would be musicologists, conductors, scholars, and fans of musical theater in general and Sondheim in particular. But I have learned that it has found another readership that I had not anticipated, but that makes me happiest of all—songwriters and composers. I hope that its influence there will be significant. And though it is perhaps presumptuous for me to suggest what lessons others should take from it, I feel compelled to make some comments.

I wish more people wrote like Stephen Sondheim. Not to sound like him or to copy him, but to invest their work with the same kind of care and intellect. Some of his approaches are overarching, such as his interest in experimentation with form and style and structure, and in trying and finding different ways to use music and lyrics in a dramatic context. Still, he believes in certain fundamental principles, such as "content dictates form," "less is more," and "god is in the details." He believes in the power of the subconscious to make connections and provide solutions, and for that reason tries to limit his work to the universe of one score at a time. Some notions are very specific, such as using the natural inflection of language to inform the rhythm and shape of the melodic line. Some goals are opposites in tension—structure versus looseness, surprise versus inevitability, clarity versus subtext. Yet, though each score is unique, his unmistakable voice shines through. Not cluster chords, changing meters, wide-ranging melodies, or unusual rhythmic entrances—things that are typically (if misleadingly) parodied.

Sondheim has a rare combination of talents, not only as a composer and lyricist, but also as a dramatist. Although he does not author his own librettos, his musical numbers are character- and plot-driven, imbued with subtext, conceived to be staged, and invariably serve a dramatic purpose. A few others are also unusually talented as both composers and lyricists,

and to some degree dramatists (Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Frank Loesser, Meredith Willson, Jerry Herman, Stephen Schwartz, and William Finn come to mind), but none, I think, at as consistently an impressive level with all three aspects. While talent, even genius, must account for much of what makes Sondheim's work special, it is the degree of craft and intellectual rigor he applies to the process that truly seems to set him apart. At the Library of Congress, I have been the archivist for collections that include the manuscripts and papers of Jerome Kern, Vincent Youmans, Oscar Hammerstein II, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, Vernon Duke, Arthur Schwartz, Frederick Loewe, Leonard Bernstein, and Jonathan Larson, and have an intimate knowledge of several others, including Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Alan Jay Lerner, Burton Lane, and Harold Rome. All of them have impressed me, and I consider myself a fan of their works. However, none of them has shown evidence of the painstaking working out of ideas I have seen among Sondheim's music and lyric manuscripts. For the music there are the long-line sketches; the page after page of accompaniment figures, alternative melodic lines, rhythms, and harmonic progressions to consider; the conceiving of themes and motives and how they might evolve or relate to one another. And though this book focuses on Sondheim's work as a composer, it is worth noting that, while all lyricists seem to make lists of rhymes, lists of synonyms, and often generate page after page of draft lyrics, Sondheim's lyric sketches also focus on the underlying ideas of the songs, their structures, and the psychology of the characters who sing them. Some might argue that this kind of attention to detail robs the works of spontaneity and tunefulness, but to this listener it creates scores of unparalleled depth and intensity.

Whatever your purpose in reading this book, I suggest that you read it not just for the specifics—the how-tos and whys—but step back and read it for its view of a creative mind at work. Sondheim as a teacher provides guideposts not just for the writing of songs, but arguably for any artistic or intellectual pursuit. And how often do we have the opportunity to learn from the best?

* * *

There are additional acknowledgements and thank-yous to be made for this new edition. Many of the same people who were acknowledged in the first edition continued with their gracious assistance, but to be added to that list are the following. From Sondheim's office, archivist Peter Jones provided invaluable guidance and scans of manuscripts. The most recent interview was recorded by sound engineer Ray Romano (recommended by my dear friend Amy Asch). At the Library of Congress, the current chief of the music division, Susan Vita, and the head of its acquisitions

and processing section, Denise Gallo, proved unflaggingly supportive and encouraging. From the Library's publishing office, neither edition of the book would have happened without the support and attention of Ralph Eubanks, director of publishing, while Susan Reyburn acted as an enthusiastic editor of the new material, and my new editor at Scarecrow Press was old friend and previous colleague Renée Camus. Also with Scarecrow Press, my production editor Jayme Bartles Reed. Brian Eisenberg was the copyist for the new musical examples and proved to be extraordinarily careful and caring. Several people suggested questions that I might ask Sondheim. Some were unasked because of time constraints and others because they didn't quite fit within the parameters of this project, but among those whose questions I was able to use or adapt were Stephen Banfield, Rick Freyer, Charles Joseph, Andrew Killick, Kim Kowalke, Paul Laird, Carol Oja, and Bruce Pomahac.

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Loras Schissel who generously shared their knowledge and expertise; and Samuel Brylawski, a friend who has been my mentor at the Library and a touchstone in my life.

I thank—fundamentally—Stephen Sondheim, for his work and the many ways it has informed and enriched my personal and professional life, and the precious gift of his time.

Introduction

While Sondheim and James Lapine were creating *Sunday in the Park with George,* the two went to the Art Institute of Chicago and stood with three of the museum's curators before the miraculous canvas of Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grand Jatte*. "What is that object up there?" they asked, pointing to an indistinct object in the middle distance. Instantly and simultaneously, the curators gave three different responses: a stove, a waffle iron, a . . . whatever. Sondheim and Lapine would eventually reimagine this comic incident in their musical's second act.

Similarly, such disagreements are common among musical scholars in deciphering composers' manuscripts. What does *this* piece of marginalia mean? How should *that* symbol be interpreted? How was *that* chord supposed to function? Rarely do we have the composer's direct commentary on how he approached his work and what his notes—both musical and textual—literally mean. After Stephen Sondheim generously agreed to bequeath his manuscripts to the Library of Congress, a series of videotaped interviews with the composer was proposed with the intention of anticipating the questions of future scholars. As such, and unlike the many, many interviews Sondheim has granted to date, these were never intended for publication but rather to serve as a complementary crib to the manuscripts. On that basis the project went forward with Sondheim's cooperation and the support of a grant from the Library of Congress.

What makes these interviews unique is their exclusive focus on Sondheim's work as a composer. Even so, the interviews became far more wide-ranging than I had imagined, with Sondheim discussing not only the nitty-gritty of how to interpret his sketches and manuscripts, but how he goes about the process of writing and composing—in short, his

thoughts and observations about the art and craft of the musical. It was only after the interviews were completed and I began transcribing them that I realized they would be of interest and use to a broader audience; hence, this volume. Using clarity as my guide and goal, I edited the verbatim transcripts—eliminating verbal tics, false starts, and some repetitions; completing sentences where their endings seemed obvious; occasionally reordering clauses within a sentence and adjusting grammar accordingly. I am grateful for Sondheim's willingness and care in going through this edition to clarify his meaning even further.

After many months of planning, preliminary examination of Sondheim's manuscripts, and consultation with scholars, musicians, and some of Sondheim's associates, the interviews were recorded over three days in October 1997 in Sondheim's Turtle Bay home—with his manuscripts close to hand. These manuscripts include sketches, drafts, and fair copies for individual numbers, and general sketches for each show where he experiments with thematic material, accompaniment figures, and other musical ideas. We began by looking at the manuscripts for *Passion*, at the time Sondheim's most recently completed score. Assuming there to be an evolution in his work as a composer, I wanted to make sure we captured where he was at that moment as opposed to where he began. I also assumed the details of the later works would be freshest in Sondheim's mind, and that many of the questions and answers would reflect backward on earlier shows.

As a result, we spent far more time on *Passion* than any other score, though this first long chapter includes many digressions about other shows. From there we worked backward through *Assassins*, *Into the Woods*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Pacific Overtures*—each show becoming a chapter here. *Merrily We Roll Along* was skipped because of limited time, but most of the questions raised by my examination of its manuscripts were effectively answered in the context of other shows. His earlier work, although often alluded to, was excluded by the constraints of tightly budgeted time and resources. However, the chapters "Interlude" and "Finale" cover a number of more general questions that I felt were important to ask but that did not easily fit into our discussions of the specific shows.

The fact that we paused every half hour for the cameraman to reload tape cartridges might explain some seemingly odd breaks or disjointed moments. Also, this is the record of a freely flowing conversation; therefore, it is not as structured as an entirely scholarly book would be. Early on I decided not to attempt to direct the conversation *too* much but to simply enable one thing to lead to another. If Sondheim had something he wanted to say, I wanted to hear it.

* * *

The following chapters tend to start with details about musical composition and become more general as they continue. One of the benefits of this book over the videotapes is that it includes excerpts from the musical scores and sketches under discussion. Some of you picking up this book might be discouraged by the fact that it begins talking about music on a fairly technical level. Be reassured that there is much that follows that requires no musical expertise at all. And to those pleased by the initial focus, it too reappears throughout.

For those unfamiliar with "figured bass" or "classical" musical notation who wish to understand more clearly those examples and portions of the discussion that deal with it, let me offer a few explanatory notes. Roman numerals are used to represent the various chords corresponding with each tone of a scale—I through VII. Thus, in the key of C, I is a chord based on C, II is a chord based on D, III is a chord based on E, et cetera. This allows progressions to be rooted in any key. While some composers who use this method differentiate the notation of major and minor by using upper case Roman numerals for major chords and lower case for minor, Sondheim does not. What he does do, which is more rare, is to precede most Roman numeral chords with an upper case or lower case letter indicating on which key (or temporary "tonicization," as he puts it) the chord is based. Sondheim's "gII$_7$" indicates a 7th chord based on the second step of a G-minor scale, or A-C-E♭-G. Subscript numbers 6, 7, 9, 11, and 13 indicate the color or type of chord, whereas numbers that begin in the superscript indicate the inversion. Thus, in the key of C, a I$_6$ indicates a C-major chord with a 6th: C-E-G-A. And a I^6 indicates a C-major triad in 1st inversion: E-G-C. A $^6_4$ is a triad in 2nd inversion, $^6_5$ is a 7th chord in first inversion, $^6_4$ is a 7th chord in 2nd inversion, and $^6_2$ is a 7th chord in 3rd inversion. These numbers indicate the intervals between the top notes to the lowest note in descending order. Thus, an E-major 7th chord in second inversion reads down: G♯-E-D♯-B, B to G♯ being a 6th, B to E being a 4th, and B to D♯ being a third. All notes of a chord are not necessarily to be sounded, though that usually cannot be determined in the sketches.

As Sondheim states clearly in these interviews, he views himself as a very tonal composer. The notations in his sketches are basically a shorthand for spelling chords quickly during the compositional process and do not necessarily reflect how he *thinks* of the chords functioning. The sketches often include alternate harmonizations that he wishes to consider, with alternatives either written below or in parentheses.

Sondheim is a rare, if not unique, composer in the world of musical theater and songwriting. He creates a discrete musical language and vocabulary for every one of his musicals. He invests enormous intellect and effort into each melody, harmony, and rhythm; each spelling of a chord; the accompaniment figures and in which registers they are placed; and every

dynamic. He plans how extended numbers will develop and evolve so that they hold together and are satisfying without becoming relentless or boring. As his own lyricist and as a dramatist who collaborates with librettists and directors, he writes music that is true to his characters and their situations. He is impeccable in his prosody, matching music and lyric in intent, inflection, and stress. Yet as individual as each score is, the unmistakable Sondheim voice sings through even his cleverest pastiches.

One of the pleasant surprises of these interviews was Sondheim's reflections on the work of some of the musical theater composers who came before him. No other composer has been more fortunate in his personal connections to the tradition. Sondheim's mentor was Oscar Hammerstein II, and his musical collaborators included Leonard Bernstein, Jule Styne, and Richard Rodgers. Dorothy Fields was a family friend, and we know he admired and communicated with talents as diverse as Bernard Herrmann, Cole Porter, and Frank Loesser. Stepping back another generation, among Hammerstein's collaborators were Vincent Youmans, Rudolf Friml, Jerome Kern, and Sigmund Romberg—*his* mentor, in turn, having been Otto Harbach. Sondheim is connected as directly as possible to the entire history of the musical—in far fewer than "six degrees of separation." That unbroken chain makes his insights and perceptions all the more valuable and rare.

During breaks in the interviews, Sondheim made two comments to me of which I am particularly proud. As these were not taped, I cannot swear to his exact words, but their sense resonates in my memory. First: "A lot of the questions you're asking, no one's ever asked me before." And later: "I'm saying things in these interviews I didn't know I thought, until you asked the question and I had to ask myself: What *do* I think about that?" I am grateful to Sondheim for the thought he put into these interviews and his permission to share them with you.

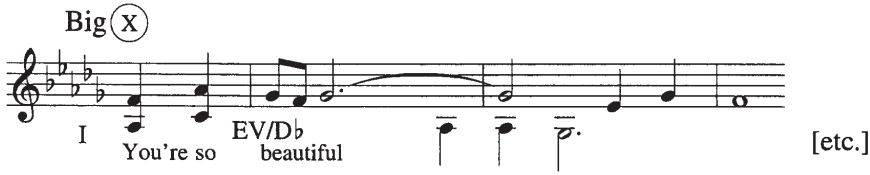
Part I

THE INTERVIEWS

Chapter 1

Passion

MH: I'd like to start with your sketches for the opening number of *Passion*, "Clara/Giorgio I," which in the published score is "Happiness (Part I)." You wrote "Big X" above this sketch and it reminded me of Gershwin writing "GT" for "good tune" on his sketches. Is there any similarity in meaning?



Example 1.1

SS: No, that mark usually means that I want that idea to go with an accompaniment. This is from a sheet of vocal ideas for Clara and Giorgio, and probably the "X" means that it corresponds with an "X" someplace else in an accompaniment figure or a few bars of accompaniment. So that I know that I want *this* to go with that accompaniment figure as opposed to another. The "Big" means it's to be the big statement. Each of the lines is a separate vocal idea. I separate them, as one does, between staves, with little parallel lines. And I sketch in little words that come from the lyric sheet to remind myself that this theme is for that particular set of lyrics.

MH: If you're working on the same section, why would you have alternate sketches in different keys?

SS: I probably have outlined a harmonic scheme someplace else. And sometimes I change because I realize that it's going out of a vocal register or that it's something that's awkward. For example, suddenly the melody will get too low, and yet if it's still within an octave-and-six or an octave-and-five—something that a singer can do—I'll leave it in that key. But if the tessitura gets too low or too high I'll switch the keys around before I get the key that I'm working in locked in my head. So, if I'm writing something in E-flat, and I realize the melody's getting too low, before it gets too entrenched in an E-flatness in my head, I'll take it up to a G major and rewrite the accompaniment in G major (or sketch out the accompaniment in G major) and then start the melodic flow going in G major.

MH: Once you've completed a song, and it's in a show, and the key has been changed to suit the performer, do you still think of it in the original key?

SS: Yes, if I'm asked to play it at the piano, I'll play it in the key I wrote it. Often, I will write in a key that I can sing. You'll notice in the manuscripts over the years the keys get lower. I used to be able to sing up to an E, even on a full stomach, and now I cannot get up above a C and my voice has darkened. I can sing lower now, but I'm essentially a bass-baritone. So, for demonstration purposes, I have to write in something that I can play and sing—to play to producers, directors, collaborators, et cetera.

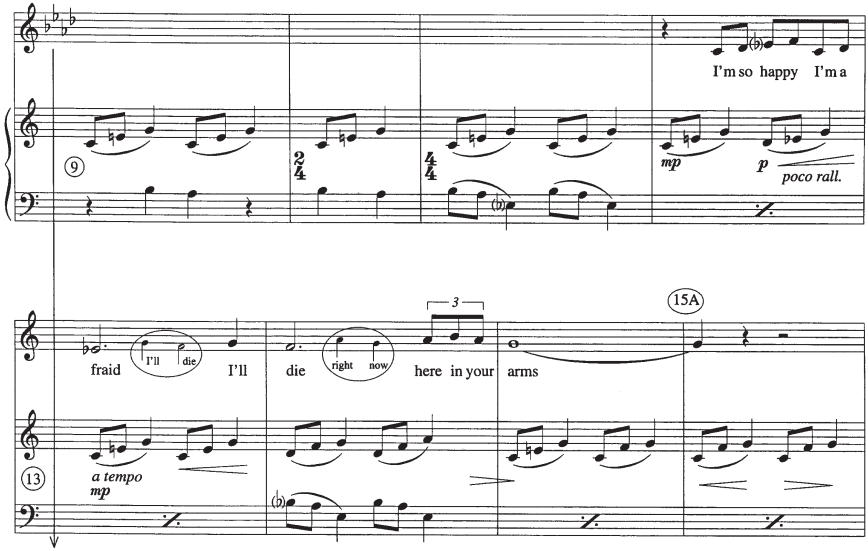
MH: Do you think of different keys as having different feelings?

SS: There are a number of things I feel about keys. Flat keys are easier to read and play in; I don't know why, but that's generally true—you'll find most musicians will say that. I switch keys from song to song—I try to, unless I'm deliberately making a large scheme of key relationships which I did in some of the longer pieces in *Passion*. If I'm just doing a score of songs, I will deliberately write in a key that I haven't written in for a while. I write partly at the piano and partly away from the piano. In the early days, particularly my first six or eight shows, I would write mostly at the piano, and my fingers would fall—my muscle memory getting too habituated—I found myself writing the same chords. I'm not very good at keyboard harmony. I never took keyboard harmony, I only took theoretical harmony. That serves me well, because if I have to make a modulation from C to E-flat, I have to find my way, and in finding my way, it gets some kind of personal statement, some freshness, in it. It may not be the way that other people would do it, and sometimes its very clumsiness will become part of that. Somebody who's got keyboard harmony can just glibly (that's both good and bad) get from one to the other in sixty-four

different ways. But, if I want to get from C to E-flat, in the key of E-flat, and I write another song in E-flat and I want to get from C to E-flat, then my fingers are likely to go in the same places. So I deliberately will write it in E major. When I feel I'm getting stale I go into sharp keys because they're so foreign and scary.

MH: When you were writing these sketches for *Passion*, would you have been at the piano, or could you have been either at the piano or away?

SS: Generally I feel my way into an accompaniment figure at the piano. I know in this case (this is the opening of *Passion*) I wanted to use bugle calls throughout the show because it takes place mostly in a military post, and a bugle, as you know, is just the triad. So I wanted to start with that. Since it starts with Giorgio, who's an army man, in bed with his mistress, it also has to be a romantic piece—a post-coital piece. In order to do that and not make it just sound military, I put in a dissonant accompaniment in the left hand, but I kept the bugle idea in the right hand. So you get this, which



Example 1.2

doesn't sound like a bugle exactly, but it becomes a major motif during the whole show. But I had to find with my fingers, as opposed to my head, the dissonant pattern in the accompaniment in the bass in the left hand. Once I found that, I could then proceed to write melodically about it and against it. What's very interesting here is I see it's in A-flat (it's deceptive because it sort of starts with an E-flat tonality, but it's in A-flat), so that once the

accompaniment gets going I will then start working out the melodic idea. That's generally the pattern. Sometimes a song will start with a melodic idea; particularly the more pretentiously composed pieces start with an accompaniment.

MH: What do you mean by "pretentiously composed"?

SS: What I mean is ambitious. "Pretentious" has a pejorative flavor to it, though not in my head. What I mean is extended—extended writing. *Passion* is composed not so much of songs, but of arioso passages that sometimes take song form. The opening is sort of a song form, but it's fairly extended, and it's fairly loose. The idea of *Passion*, for those who don't know, is that nothing comes to a conclusion.

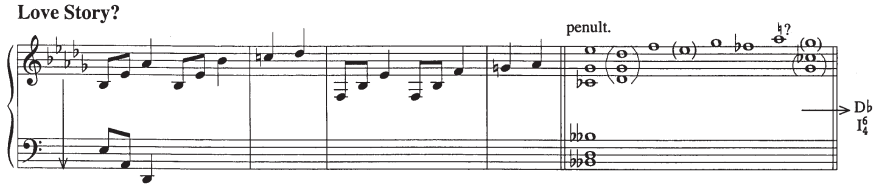
MH: Musically?

SS: Musically. Musically the idea is to make it one long rhapsody so the audience will never applaud. There are some perfect cadences in it, but not very many. The audience is never encouraged to think that something is over, because I didn't want the mood broken and the audience being made conscious it was in a theater.

MH: In retrospect do you wish you had?

SS: No, I'm glad. It's right for the piece. Applause would be entirely wrong for it. The piece is a rhapsody; a rhapsody is what it is. It's just wrong to break the flow with applause; it was always conceived as a long song.

MH: On this sketch, you have "penult." and a natural above with the question mark. What did you mean?



Example 1.3

SS: I'd want to do this at the piano, but this is the climax before the end—that's what "penult." means—and this is the harmony I wanted to reach. And I think, although this is written in five flats, I didn't know whether I

wanted an A-flat on top or an A-natural, because there's a B-double-flat in the bass. Obviously, I wanted a clash between what looks like a B-major triad over what looks like an A-major tonality in the bass.

MH: And things in parentheses indicate an alternate?

SS: Everything in parentheses indicates an alternate. For example, in this first chord, I didn't know whether I wanted the C-flat in or not, so I put two D-flats in as an alternate, which makes essentially the same sound, but makes it much more of an F-sharp minor chord. Because—look at that—it's a first inversion of an F-sharp minor chord if you read these notes from the top as C-sharp, F-sharp, C-sharp, A, C-sharp, A. And I suspect I found that . . . because obviously I didn't want it to end (that's why it says penultimate), I didn't want it to feel as if it really reached a cadence, but I suspect I settled for that. I'd have to compare this sketch with the final manuscript, but I suspect I did not settle for something quite so bare.

MH: If you were working on this away from the piano, would you then take it to the piano to make the decision?

SS: You got it exactly. Usually I'll check it at the piano and say, ugh, no, that's not what I meant. But most chordal stuff I work out at the piano. If I have a chord, and a chord, and a chord, and I want to work out some contrapuntal passage, I might work on the couch and then take it to the piano and check it. But if I'm looking for the chordal structures, I'll generally do that with my fingers at the piano.

MH: What do the red arrows throughout your sketches mean?

SS: That means what I like. As you'll see, there are a lot of pages of accompaniment figures, and after I've written down as many ideas as I can, and I feel as though I'm ready to give birth, I'll go back over it and decide what it is that I really want to remember and try to preserve. When something is the basis of the piece, I don't need a red arrow for that, and it may be surrounded by variations on it. But where I had another idea, I wanted to be sure that I considered it.

MH: Do you mean another idea for the same moment?

SS: Well, for the same piece, though perhaps another place in it.

MH: After you've done all the sketching, is that when you play everything through and decide what to arrow?

SS: Yes, when I think I've exhausted the possibilities—at least for that moment. I'll have a set of ideas, and I don't want to bore the listener. Then I will look through and see, because all of these are related to each other, either harmonically, or in terms of melodic outline, or in terms of rhythm. So it isn't like it's an idea for another song—it comes out of the same network of ideas, but it does offer contrast and variety. The trick always—well, in any art, I guess, but particularly in any art that takes place over a period of time—is how to give it variety yet make it hold together. How do you prevent it from becoming an add-a-pearl necklace? At the same time you don't want to just repeat ideas. It's the whole business of long-line development.

MH: Has it become any easier?

SS: I recognize the dangers of boredom more now than I did at the beginning.

MH: With an audience?

SS: No, I can't judge. The reason a lot of people complain the music is difficult is because it does tend to change. It's something I picked up partly from Cole Porter and partly from Leonard Bernstein. One of the things about Lenny's music that I like is he keeps surprising you—particularly rhythmically. Just when you think something is going to be a 3/4 bar, it turns out to be a 4/4 bar, or when you think it's going to be a four-measure phrase, it turns out to be a three-measure phrase. So you rarely get a chance to get ahead of the music, and that keeps the music fresh—because it's full of surprises. He used to say—it's not his phrase, but he's the first person I heard it from—that music should be inevitable but fresh. And when you listen to Jerome Kern, you know exactly what he meant. Anybody who studies a Cole Porter song is due for a lot of surprises, because what looks like a simple AABA form, turns out to really be A-A prime-B-A double prime—he does not repeat the A section. It's almost repeated, but not quite. And the result is the ear is constantly freshened, and that's what keeps music alive over a period of time. People who like my music and say they discover new things in it the more they listen to it, it's because there are these little surprises scattered throughout. So that what is jolting on first hearing, on the second hearing you start to see more how it's part of the pattern—even if it's not a conscious process.

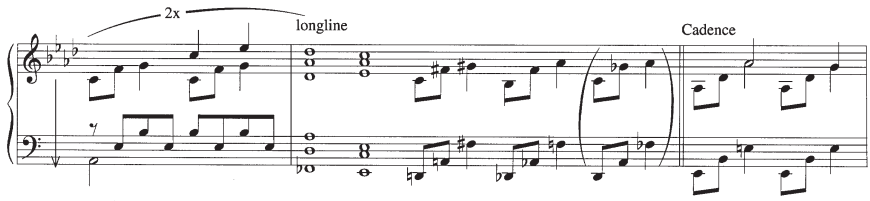
MH: But Porter wouldn't do it through the rhythmic changes that Lenny would?

SS: No, Porter did it melodically and harmonically. You look at "Just One of Those Things" and see the tiny variations, and yet, it's so close to the standard form that it could become popular. He's the great experimenter from that point of view. Kern is the great harmonic experimenter. With Porter, it's really in terms of melodic line and how he keeps spinning it out in little tiny variations and, of course, the harmonic sophistication. And Lenny has a lot of harmonic surprise, but primarily the thing that surprises you is rhythmic structures, I think.

MH: Did you ever talk to him about that, or do you just know?

SS: No, I just know.

MH: And you actually did write "long-line" in this example.



Example 1.4

SS: Ah, well. These two chords represent the entire progression of this passage, so it's the spinning out of these two—they're written as whole notes, but that means nothing. I write long-line stuff in either whole notes or half notes; a whole note could represent four bars, eight bars, twelve bars, sixteen bars. And the half note underneath means: say you have a C on the top—there's the "C-ness" of it. (I'm beginning to sound like Lenny—Oy.) There's the C-ness on top, but then there's a G and an F, which means that for the first couple of bars it will have G as a tonal center, next F as a tonal center. And to be able to visualize that is of great help when you're writing extended pieces—as opposed to a song form, which, as I say, is either AABA or ABAB. I rarely use long-line stuff when I'm just writing a thirty-two-bar song, although there is an aspect of that. I know in "Too Many Mornings" I did that, but that's a longish song. Usually I don't bother, but if I'm writing extended passages like this—most of the stuff in Passion is extended—then to hold it together, the glue has to be harmonic and has to be spinning out the triad and spinning out the harmony.

MH: But the reason you would actually write "long-line" there?

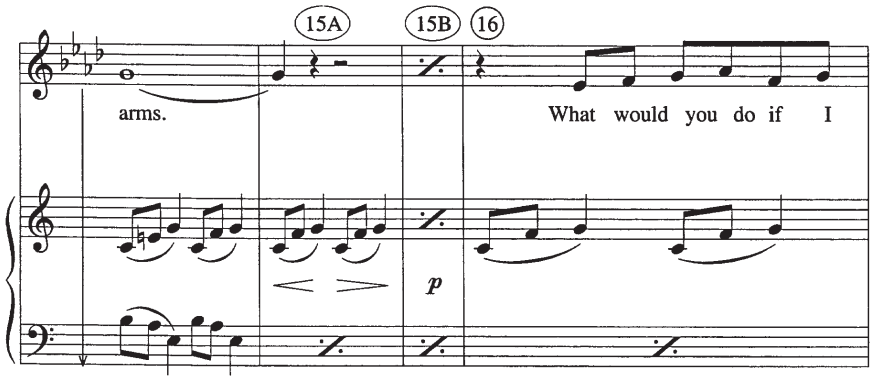
SS: Is to remind myself where I'm going. One of the things I loved when I went to the Library of Congress and saw the Gershwin sketch for the trio at the end of *Porgy and Bess* was he knew where he was going. He would just put little thumbtacks all along the way to remind himself: Okay, I gotta reach the C-major chord over here. And he's spinning out the melodic line and then he thinks: I'll fill in the harmony later, I won't worry about how I get from here to here, I just want to be sure that I get *there*. That's, in a sense, what these are—these are bedposts. Oscar Hammerstein used to talk about "thumbtacks" in terms of lyric writing—laying out the carpet, and then putting in the other tacks along here: Here's point A, here's point B, here's point C. You can see it in his lyrics, they develop like little plays because of that. It's not just repetition, there's development. He gets from point A to B to C. I'm not talking about it in terms of dramatic action, I'm talking about it in terms of idea. I thought: Well why not do that musically too? And then when I studied with Milton Babbitt, I found out there's a nice tradition dating back at least to Mozart that spins things out that way.

MH: When you start "spinning out the melody," do you ever get to a point where you realize, because of what the melody's done, that you want to go back and change a "thumbtack"?

SS: Usually what happens is that I've worked on it so much that the unconscious takes over, and I arrive where I want to arrive. I'm sure there are times when, of course, I bend it. I'm not rigid about it, and I realize that the melody itself will imply something. But since I'm somebody who believes that the heart of music is harmony, as opposed to melody, it's very important for me to have the sense of where the harmonies are going. And the harmonies imply the melody. And quite often the long-line will turn out to be of melodic value. I'm sure at a certain point I took this opening business and the lower voice, and used that, because what's implied here is you have here an E-flat tonality in the left hand and a C-major tonality in the right hand. I'm sure I used that juxtaposition throughout. Even if it's not C major and E-flat, but that relationship. And the E-flat isn't entirely resolved because it's got an unresolved fourth in it. So again, it will hold the piece together.

MH: What also interested me in this sketch, is that it looks like you divided what was originally one measure into two measures—15A and 15B. How do you decide the amount of breath or time that a moment needs? Is it for the actor?

SS: I have an instinct, and it may not be accurate, but it's true, that when Lapine heard this he said to me: I would like to have a little more time



Example 1.5

there. Not necessarily for staging, but emotional time, because this looks to me like it was squeezed in later. However, it may be that I just decided that I didn't want to get to what would have been bar 16 so quickly. It just may be that. There's this whole thing: I wanted so much to get that post-coital sense of relaxation, and that means that there should be pauses. Everybody has a different way of dealing with that moment, but in this case, I wanted Clara to be both a little coy with him and at the same time she's relaxing—the balloon is deflating. And that meant that I put in little passages of rest that ordinarily I wouldn't do. If this was just a ballad I would try to keep it going, but being a post-sex ballad, I wanted to have places where she would just breathe. I do know there was some place in this opening number where Lapine asked for more time, but it's probably later on. This is only the sixteenth bar, and the music starts with an orgasm. She's only been singing four bars here, and I just didn't want it to go on so quickly. That's why that extra measure's there. And I think what happened was I played it over and I thought: No, no, she needs more breathing space here.

MH: There's so much thought behind your choices, do you ever wonder how the performances of actors in future productions might be affected by not having information about the intentions that were behind these decisions?

SS: I wish they would be. I had a nice experience with Alun Armstrong. He played Sweeney in the Declan Donnelan production we were doing of *Sweeney Todd* at the National Theater in London. I was rehearsing Alun and the quintet in the letter-writing scene in the second act. I worked out with him when he dipped the pen in the inkwell, and when he wrote and

when he signed, when he grunted and when he giggled—all that to go with the quintet singing—because I work out everything in detail. He's an aggressive fellow, and he actually turned and he said: "You mean you thought these things out when you were writing this down?" He thought that that kind of stuff—when you dip a quill pen—is worked out during rehearsal. I said: "Yes, of course, every single dip." Now the director may change it, but I know exactly when I want him to dip the pen in and when I want him to cross out a word and repeat a word. There are moments during "The Letter" where he writes a word, and then he thinks, and he kind of slavers over the word because he likes it so much because it's going to draw the judge into his trap. That's all worked out. I don't know what a director who doesn't know this will tell an actor when he asks: "Why does he repeat that word?" I know why he repeats it.

MH: Do you write it down anywhere?

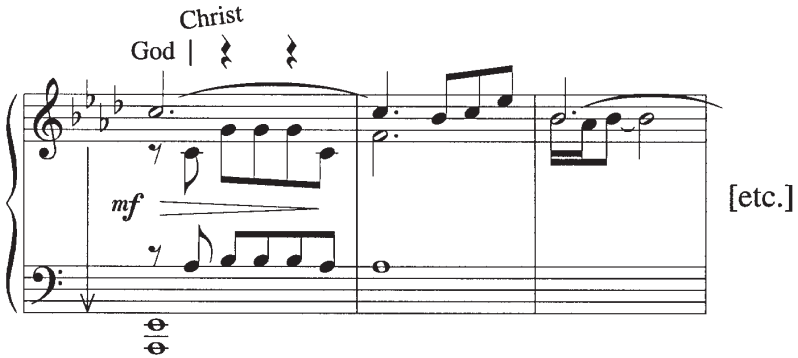
SS: There's no way to do that. Though, actually, I do write stage directions down. I think probably on that one I wrote something like "He muses." So the answer is: Yes, I work out all these things in detail. It's a knee-jerk reaction from an experience I had with Jerome Robbins when we were writing *West Side Story* and I played him "Maria." Lenny was off someplace, and I was the one who played it for him. And he asked me: "Well, what do you see happening on the stage?" I said: "Well, Tony is singing this love song. . . ." Jerry said: "Well, what's he doing?" I said: "He's singing . . . he's full of emotion." He said: "You stage it!" We started talking, and I learned then that it is of great value to a director to stage every song you write within an inch of its life. They can use it as a blueprint, or depart from it entirely, but they have something to go from. So I stage everything. And I tell my collaborating director what I intend, but he doesn't have to, and often won't, pay any attention to it. I worked out the whole opening to the second act of *Sweeney*—the beer garden scene, "God, That's Good!"—where Mrs. Lovett is serving twenty-seven people at once. I worked out what each customer was doing—the one that was underpaying, the one that was drunk, the one that was a glutton, et cetera—and I had them at different tables. And Hal Prince said: "I think it would be much better if they were all at one table." So Hal completely changed my basic scheme, but the details are still there for him to tell the actors. I had the guy who's sneaking away with trying not to pay at *that* table while Mrs. Lovett's back is turned over *here*, and I had him trying to sneak out and Tobias catches him. Hal had them all at one table, so he had to work out how someone could try to sneak out—because at a big table everybody sees everybody—it's not so easy to work out. But he wanted a big table because he wanted that sense of Dickensian stomping. When it

was done in a revival at the Circle in the Square, there were different little tables, and that was the way I intended it. Hal's production had much more of a kind of vigor, but that production had much more detail in it.

MH: Did you have to change the score because of it? Did Hal need more or less time because of the changed staging?

SS: No. That sometimes does happen in revivals. That happened just recently for the concert of *Into the Woods*. Somebody said: "Could I get some more bars here?" And I said: "Absolutely." We needed more time to get people onto the stage so I allowed extra vamps.

MH: In some of your sketches and drafts for "Happiness (Part II)," you have it opening with the word "Christ" instead of "God." What was behind your decision to change it from one to the other?



Example 1.6

SS: I love the word "Christ." I love the sound of it. It seems to be more agonizing. "God, you are so beautiful" has a kind of sentimental feeling to it. "Christ, you are so beautiful" has a sense of shock. "Christ" is a shocking word. I prefer "Christ" and my guess is that Lapine persuaded me to change it, not to make him a villain or anything like that. It also has to do of course with the fact that "God" can be extended as a note, and "Christ" cannot. You can't go "Chr-i-i-ist"; it loses all its value. But you can go "G-aaahd." You can sing a love song with that single word. So I can't tell you definitely what the reason was, it may have been Lapine, or I may have heard this sung and I thought: It's a little too shocking. To say "God" on the stage forty years ago was a shock. Now it's not such a shock. To say "Christ" still is a shock. It

really is, to quote, taking the Lord's name in vain. I'm not just talking about to the Christians in the audience, it just has that feeling—it's a real [loud clap].

MH: Would the fact that *Passion* takes place in Italy—a Catholic country—have anything to do with your choice?

SS: I didn't even think of that. Of course James and I talked a lot about that, so it's conceivable that character wouldn't have said "God." I don't know what the Italian word would be that would be an equivalent. When you say "God, it's hot outside," you're not really swearing. But if you say "Christ, it's hot outside," that's got real force. I just wanted one of those expletives that isn't an expletive.

MH: Would you elaborate on the erasures in your sketches?

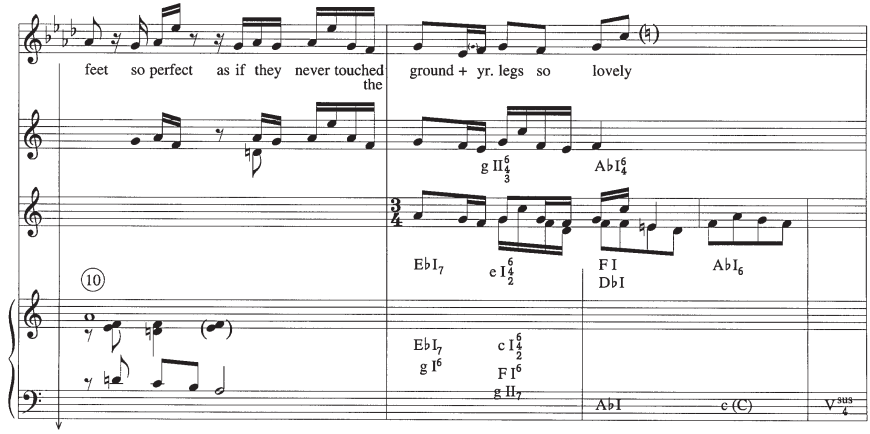
SS: When I start writing a piece out in detail—making real copy—and then I turn against it, or I decide to change something, but it's not worth erasing most of a page, I'll rewrite the bars I want to keep on a fresh page. Then on the original I'll lightly erase the page and bar numbers, but not so thoroughly that I can't see them. Then I know that this was a discarded page, and I don't end up with two page twos with two bar eights, and say: "What . . .?" Because erasures don't mean anything, I erase all the time. And often, my so-called completed copy will have a lot of erasures in it. It's not a fair copy. I have the luxury of giving it to a copyist who will then write it out in neat form. She often gets a manuscript from me that's full of erasures. Incidentally, one of the small, practical problems of writing music today is that in the old days I used to have a messenger come to the house and pick up the manuscripts and take them to the copyist. Ever since the fax machine was invented, we send faxes. But if you send faxes of erased notes, you get a call from the copyist asking: "Is that an E-natural, or is that a D-natural?" You can read my manuscript okay in person, because I write very heavily with a pencil (and I write also with Blackwing pencils, which smudge very easily). I try to write very dark for the copyist to understand it, hoping that she won't have to call me.

MH: Do you always work with the same copyist? Do you request someone in particular?

SS: For many years I worked with a well-known copyist around town named Mathilde Pinchus. After she died I worked with her assistants for a while, and now I work with a woman named Peggy Serra. She's very quick and very smart. Because of the kind of harmony that I use, she

doesn't make assumptions. She doesn't assume that just because I'm in F major, that a note's an A-natural.

MH: In this sketch, I'm struck by the layers of harmonies that you've indicated and the way that you use Figured-Bass—the fact that for almost every harmonic change, you also imply a key change. So, as I read it, it looks like you're starting with a II chord in the key of G minor, going to a I chord in the key of A-flat.



Example 1.7

SS: Well, if you have an A-flat chord, how are you going to notate the A-flat if you're in a G-minor tonality? You can't, because in G minor, the bass of the II chord's going to be an A-natural. So, if you're going to go to an A-flat chord you have to change the tonality first. If all the notes are going to be within the G-minor tonality then I'll just go: II-III-IV-V—whatever it is. But if you're going to change, how else would you notate it? There's no other way to do it. I was not brought up on Guitar Notation; I was brought up on so-called Figured-Bass, or Classical Notation. I find Guitar notation useless because you don't get enough information about the positions of the chords and the building of the notes. You get what the notes are, but not what the bass is and what the basis of the chord is. So I use this rather elaborate form of notation, but also to remind myself. Here I have an idea for an accompaniment, and now I want to carry it out harmonically, and I know I'm going to use this little passage in bar 10, which I've just sketched in. That's going to be the rhythm of the accompaniment. So, quickly, while I've got the harmonic scheme in mind, I will write out the harmonies. What's interesting here is these are all alternates for the passages.

MH: So you don't mean this to be read as chords superimposed on each other?

SS: No, not at all. Because you have so many choices. Particularly if you're using any kind of dissonant harmonies—in terms of musical theater, not Alban Berg. Since there are so many choices, and since, whether you use E-flat-G-B-flat and D, or E-flat-G-B-flat and C is an enormous difference. And those have entirely different notations, I have to have the alternates. There isn't an awful lot of difference between E-flat I_6 and E-flat I_7, but there is a difference. And I want to remind myself: Don't settle for one without examining the other very carefully. And then when you see them on a level—if it's going to be a G-minor I^6 it's going to go to an F-major I^6. If, however, it's an E-flat I_7 it's going to go C-minor I^6_4. So that when they're on a horizontal line it means: If I choose *this* then that follows, if I choose this other one then that follows. Usually the top one is the one that's going to work, and I probably ended up using the E-flat, C-minor, et cetera. I was also screwing around with the melodic outline and deciding whether I wanted to use four sixteenths or an eighth and two sixteenths, and sometimes that makes a huge difference.

MH: You asked: How else are you going to notate those chords? But in your mind are you also thinking of it as a modulation to that key?

SS: No, no, no, no. First of all, I never think in terms of modulation, particularly in this kind of music. It's constantly changing—within chord to chord—keys, so to speak. No, I know what the tonality is—I write very tonal music. But to go from chord to chord, where there are changes of the center of the tonality? No. This just means for these four notes, that's going to be an A-flat tonality. Even though one could notate it, if you wanted, as C minor. That could very well be a C-minor-VI^6, but it's an A-flat chord simply because in between I've gone to something else. So, it's much easier for me to refer to these and read each chord as a separate chord. Rather than think: All right, shall I write this in A-flat with a flatted fifth? No. I'd rather write it in whatever other notation I want to use—depending. An F-minor I^6 (if that's what I was doing), if it's going to be A-flat-C-D-F, as opposed to an A-flat chord with a sixth on top and a flatted fifth. That's all. It's just whatever's easier for me to read.

MH: The inversions that you chose here—what is it about them . . .?

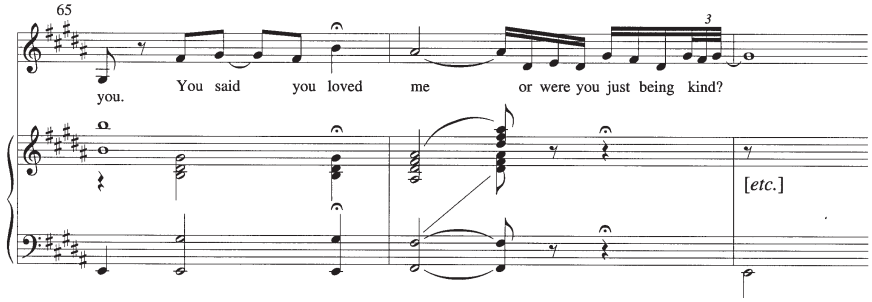
SS: Well, I learned a long time ago, and I try and use it more and more, that—particularly in music that you want to keep moving—most composers of songs and in musical theater tend to use block harmonies. That

is to say, everything's based on the root position—generally. And certainly that was the tradition, with the rare exception of Kern and sometimes Porter. Rodgers wrote mostly root positions. And yet, inversions are exactly what gives something variety while you're holding it together with glue. Assume you're in C major and you want to get to a I chord. You know a lot of stuff is written over a pedal point in musical theater; I write with a lot of pedal point, but it isn't just a matter of writing wrong notes in the right hand while you constantly have your ostinato bass; it's a question of how long do you want that bass to pound into your listener's ears? Musical harmony, as you know, moves by bass line. That is the motive that changes things. And it doesn't matter how you screw around with the notes on top; if the bass remains solidly consistent, it's going to sound that way throughout. So, if you want to stay in C major, and you want some variety, why not go to a C I^6? Now the instability of first inversions is something that's very hard to deal with when you're so used to block harmony. I get scared sometimes when I use a I^6 that it's all going to fall apart. Because, you know, it's so easy and satisfying to pound away at the I-V-I-V-I-V, as most songs do. But when you get to the I^6 chord, it becomes a little more interesting. Because the I^6 chord tends not to want to go back to the V, but to lead to a IV or even, sometimes, to a VI chord. So, if you're in C major, the E will pull toward an F in the bass or pull toward an A in the bass. I'm talking in the simplest possible chordal terms. But at least you're getting away from that C-G-C-G-C-G. So, that's why I try to give myself as many opportunities as I can. I see there are a lot of first inversions in this passage, and clearly I wanted the passage to move—I wanted it to be liquid—and one way of doing that is inversions. Look at that, for two bars you've had a pedal tone underneath, and it's about time to get off the pot, so to speak. That's why I try to use inversions.

MH: Do you go for a bass line that you think will give you melodic counterpoint?

SS: That's what long-line composition is: What's going on on the top, and what's going on in the bottom, and how they do that, and how do they then make the music stay within F major, before you get to the second movement, so to speak, which goes to the A-flat major. I often will make long-line with just two lines—the top and the bottom—because that's how you make music move. And sometimes, if I'm trying to be clever, the melodic line will be the inversion of the bass and vice versa. There are all those kinds of things. But they're more than being clever, they really hold the music together. I'm a firm believer that the ear hears things that the mind does not know, particularly in non-musicians, but

even in a musician. That, if it's there, it's there. You look at a sidewalk, you don't see the grouting, but the grouting is there. If you've built sidewalks, you see the grouting. You say: Gee, that's bad grouting over there. (This is a terrible metaphor and I'm going to pound it into the ground.) The whole point is that what cements music is a musician's business, and the idea is *not* to make it effortful for the listener—to make it effortless for the listener. But that cement is what makes the piece hold together, and if you put too much cement in, it absolutely rigidifies it and it becomes boring. Actually, "grouting" is a very good metaphor now that I come to think of it, because it holds it together, but allows it to expand and contract and prevents it from breaking. That's exactly what should be going on with the business of an inversion: An inversion is to allow the music to expand a little bit—instead of just going I-IV, why not go I-I^6-IV? I remember, there's an inversion in "Losing My Mind"—which is an absolutely traditional thirty-two-bar song—but I used an inversion, and when I got to it, I thought: Gee, that's good, that's something Kern would have done. It's very simple, the song's mostly based on root position harmonies, and then there's this one inversion—I think it's in the sixth bar of each eight—and it just



Example 1.8

gives real . . . air. It's a tiny thing, but it gives real air. You have this desert and a tiny little oasis in the middle. I think it pays off in terms of letting the listener off the hook, and giving the listener a breath—the ear a breath—to go on and not fall asleep. Unfortunately, in musical theater, particularly in the last forty years, audiences like to fall asleep—they like to know what's happening next, they don't want to be surprised. But I think what makes a song last—or music last, or art last—is surprise; particularly narrative art—music, in the sense of narrative art that exists in time.

MH: When you hear other people's work, can you hear those subtleties consciously?

SS: No. Absolutely not. All I know is that my ear is surprised. I've been around the block so many times that I tend to be ahead of the chordal structure of *most* music that I hear in the musical theater. So when it surprises, it really surprises. Sometimes, as in a score like Adam Guettel's *Floyd Collins*, which I think is a great score, I want to study the music when it's published. I really want to see how he did it. I've heard the recording three times. The music's not all that dissonant, it's just that he's got a fresh mind; he doesn't go where you expect him to and yet it sounds inevitable. You know that's what Lenny meant: It mustn't sound "dump-bump-be-um-pump, ump-*eem*" [sings "shave and a haircut" with a wrong final note]. It shouldn't be arbitrary, it should be inevitable. You get that in Kern, and you get that in Adam Guettel's work too. And that's the mark of a good composer, because he's surprising without going: Nyah nyah, nyah nyah; you thought I was going to G, nyah nyah, I'm going to F-sharp. Anybody can do that, and they do it all the time. Lenny criticized the score of *Forum*. He said there was a lot of wrong-note music in it, and I bristled when he said that, but he was right. A song like "Pretty Little Picture" has absolutely unnecessary dissonances in it because I was so afraid of writing a triad. When you're young and you're trying to make a style for yourself (it's true of every composer I know), you decorate the music so that it doesn't sound like anybody else's. And, of course, the real point is, if you try to make it sound like everybody else's and it's yours, it'll come out your own. So, it's ironic, but every young composer has to go through that. I went through it with *Forum*. There's some stuff in *Forum* that is natural to me, but there are other things where I can just hear myself being ashamed of what I was writing.

MH: Ashamed at the time, or subsequently?

SS: It was unconscious. It was: How do I make this interesting? And one of the ways you don't make something interesting is adding a tritone on the top, and yet everybody does it—you write: C-E-G-*F-sharp*.

MH: Do you feel restricted writing for musical theater? Based on what you've been saying, do you wish you had pursued other types of music?

SS: That's a hard question. As you know—as *you* know—I don't like opera, but I have a feeling that I wish I did. Because, I'll tell you something, it's much more satisfying and easier to write something like *Passion* than it is to write something like *Merrily We Roll Along*. To write a thirty-two-bar song that has freshness and style to it and tells the story is really

hard. And nobody does it anymore. Everybody writes so-called "sung-through" pieces, and it's because anybody can write sung-through pieces. It's all recitative, and they don't develop anything, and it just repeats and repeats and repeats. And that's what most shows are. I don't even go see the shows; it's so boring to me. But it's really hard to write a song, and nobody writes songs anymore in the musical theater—they write extended pieces. And I know from *Passion*, it's much easier to write extended arioso stuff than it is to write songs.

MH: Then do you have more pride in *Merrily* as a musical accomplishment?

SS: I don't want to compare, because I'm very proud of *Passion*, but, yeah, I'm very, very proud of *Merrily*. *Merrily* was the hardest score I ever had to write, and it was partly because I was trying to recapture what I was like when I was twenty-five without making a comment on it. It's about two young songwriters, and I wanted to convey what they would have written back in the late fifties, early sixties, without making it a takeoff or a parody. *And* they're supposed to be talented. Writing it was like pushing a pea up a hill with your nose. What I like about it is it sounds effortless to me now—it just sounds like a nice score—and I know what went into it. *And* it tells the story in thirty-two-bar songs. I mean some of the songs are 108 bars, but they're sections of thirty-two bars—and by thirty-two bars I mean the whole thing is based on modules of four-bar and eight-bar phrases. Whereas *Passion* is all: Oooh, I think, yes, she'll sing a little longer here, now . . . Aaah, I'll give her a little rest here . . . Now maybe I could bring that theme back in here. I see why opera composers had a good time: it's much easier.

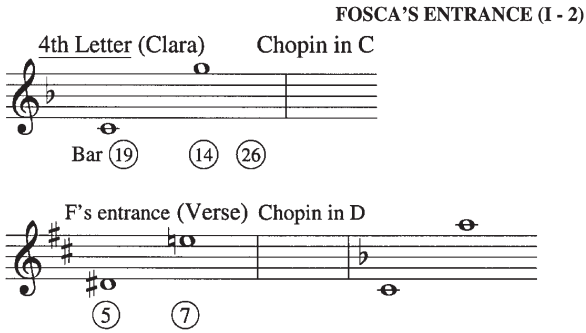
MH: What about non-vocal music?

SS: I haven't written enough to have any wisdom on that.

MH: The desire?

SS: I would love to write ballet music. I'm square enough that I like the "Dance of the Hours." When I first played my music for Jerry Robbins, he said: "You ought to be writing ballet"—that I write dance music. It had never occurred to me, but he was right. If I wrote any concert music it would be ballet.

MH: We're looking at "Fosca's Entrance I, 2." I was just intrigued by these few notes here.



Example 1.9

SS: When I write—when I start—if I have an immediate idea, before I start a sketch sheet, I'll put down some kind of basic idea. Where it says "Chopin in C" alludes to how I was imitating Chopin for Fosca's piano piece. "Bar 19, bar 14, bar 26" looks to me like a later notation. But the point was the range was going to be from C to G.

MH: The vocal range for that character?

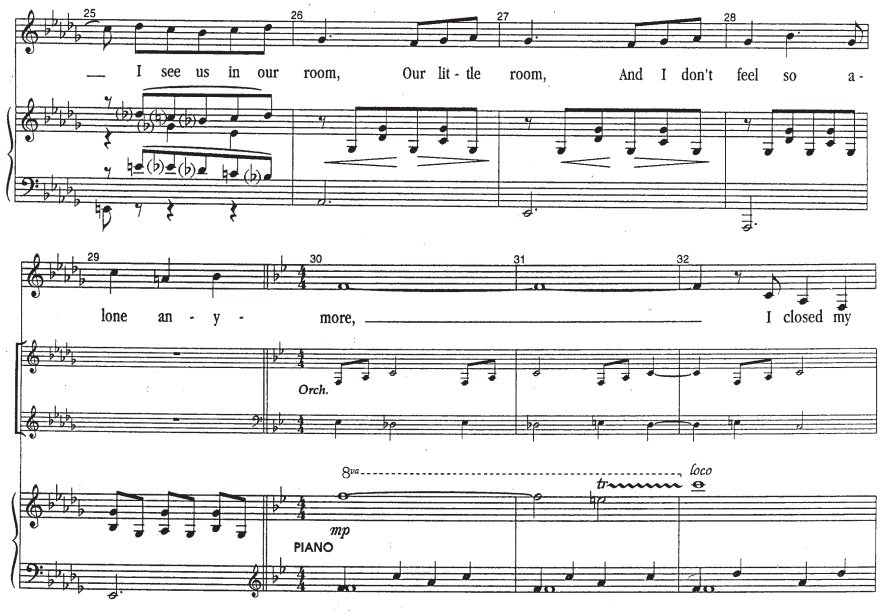
SS: Yes, exactly. And here I've written "verse" over the E-natural.

MH: Why would you think that? What would make you say her verse should be in E-natural?

SS: I have a feeling this is her actual entrance. And the numbers in circles mean bar numbers—in this case, bars 5 and 7. So, let's see if there's a D-sharp in bar 5 in some remarkable way . . . and of course there isn't. This is the Chopin thing. Clearly, what I'm doing is I'm trying to figure out how to have her sing against the Chopin. Because there are two things going on here: there's the piano piece and her vocal. That's what I obviously am trying to work out. Let's see, we're in the key of . . . we're sort of in the key of D, but not really.

MH: Usually, the audience thinks it's her playing piano upstairs.

SS: I've established that earlier, so I know that I want to use that. What goes on before the entrance is that we hear the music earlier. And now this is in the orchestra, and it's an echo of what we heard before. So this is the orchestral version of the piano, which I've done with sustained chords and with an occasional whiff of the accompaniment figure from



Example 1.10

the piano piece. What's interesting here is the flat signature above where it says "4th letter." I remember vaguely now, I was making a transition from Clara's song—you know she has this sort of waltz ". . . our little room. . ." et cetera—and against it, in comes dissonant music which is Fosca. Clearly what I was doing was making a relationship between F major and D major. D major being what Fosca's going to get into here. This may be the long-line of it, because look, it returns to F major.

MH: Fosca's keys became lower in the actual show, so how do you deal with key relationships for different sections with different singers when the keys change with the casting?

SS: Unfortunately, unlike opera, in musicals you cast for the people. In opera you force: it's a five-hundred-pound soprano and she's forty years old and she's playing Juliet—that's what you do. Because the suspension of disbelief that audiences bring to opera is so much greater than what they bring to so-called musical theater. I've rarely had to change musical structure to suit voices. Fosca's entrance, for example, is a solo; Giorgio's is speech, so it doesn't matter what key it's in. There is no over-arching design to the score of *Passion*—it is not one long piece like *Wozzeck* or *Lulu*.

Sections are done that way, but I'm too practical to force people into some kind of scheme that. . . .

MH: There's no score like that of yours?

SS: No, none. There are sections, there are sections. But where the individual sections are set is arbitrary in the sense that you accommodate the singer. So I never think in terms of an overarching musical structure. One of the reasons I don't like opera is it's so full of *longueurs* and recitative; in musical theater what you want is the ability to cut things. If you've built an entire structure, and you suddenly decide that the center, the capstone, which happens to be this beautiful aria in E major and it's what everything has accumulated to is E major, and then you decide it's boring and you want to cut it out, there goes your structure. I argue: You know operas have intermissions, so what the hell's the point of writing one—unless it's a one-act opera like *Wozzeck*. Would *Tosca* really suffer if the entire second act were a half-tone lower? Would the design go out the window? Would we be bored to death? Would we feel a thing wasn't working? I don't think so.

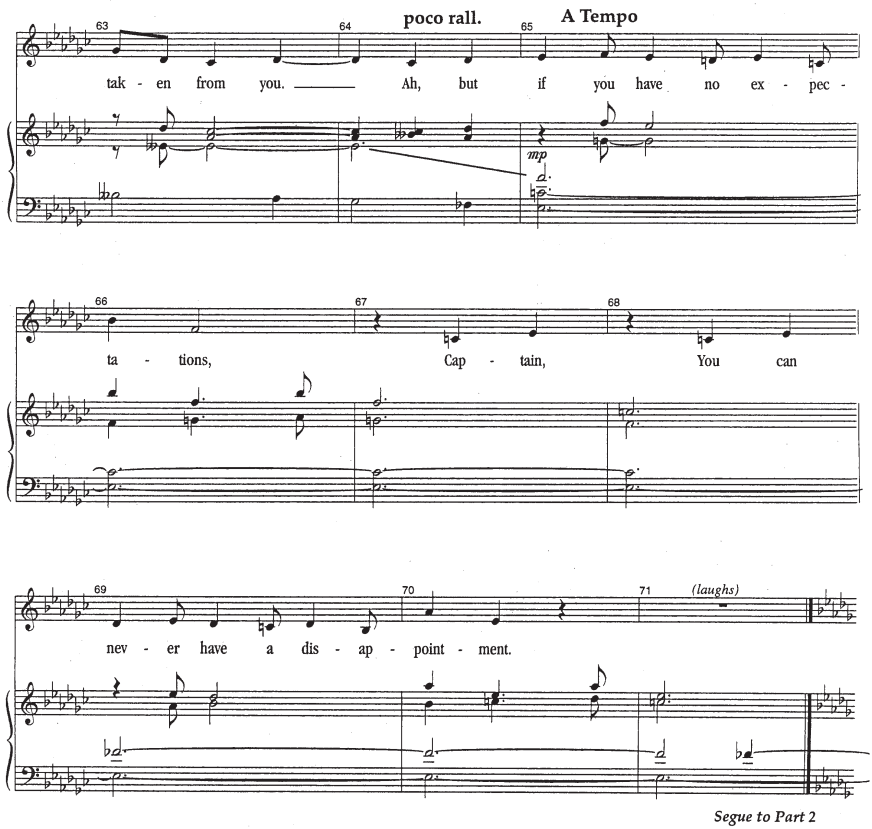
MH: In an ideal world, say, fifty years from now, somebody's doing a production of any of your scores, as opposed to going to the published piano-vocal scores, would it be preferable if they went back to your original manuscripts and used the keys that pieces were composed in?

SS: That would be fine. I don't think it would make any difference. It's all in the color of the voice. As long as they don't change anything within the piece I don't think it matters, I really don't. I once had to change the structure within a piece. It was Mrs. Lovett's first song in *Sweeney Todd*—"The Worst Pies in London." I had it quite worked out in terms of its own harmonic design and the long-line, and Angie couldn't handle it. Because, though she can sing in head, it has an entirely different effect—it's a comic effect particularly—and so I had to take the whole second half of it and switch things around to accommodate her voice. I think the song turned out fine anyway, but ideally it would have been the other way, because I had a specific harmonic plan.

MH: So when New York City Opera did their production of *Sweeney Todd*, did you think of going back to the original version?

SS: It never occurred to me to go back. Also, that would mean to re-orchestrate. All those practical considerations.

MH: This is a moment that's just impressed me a lot because of how quickly yet subtly it changes the mood.



Example 1.11

SS: It's probably by chance.

MH: It's the end of the first section, where Fosca has the breakdown, and then very quickly the transition to the "have you explored the town" section. What do you try to do musically to create a transition like that—for both the audience and the actor—and to give them something to play?

SS: It's an hysterical woman who has realized that she's talked too much, and she may be chasing away the man of her dreams whom she theoretically just met, but whom she's been spying on, and she suddenly decides to become charming. But Fosca's idea of charming is our idea of hysteri-

cal. And so that's what's behind the change in music. So what I want to do is find something that's chattery and chirpy and slightly annoying. That is the intention musically. Now, if you say: Why did I choose chords like that? That's all it's doing—to echo the moment.

MH: Do you do things musically to help the actor make emotional transitions?

SS: No, make the character. When Donna Murphy auditioned for us we gave her this piece. Her audition performance could have gone on stage that night. She's intelligent. There's something in her that identified with the character right away, and I write careful scenes. I say this with no modesty at all: When I'm writing dramatic stuff, I'm a playwright. This is a worked-out scene, and I can instruct the actress how to play this scene, and the music is part of the dialogue. I can tell her why the music gets quick *here*, why it gets slow *here*, why there's a ritard *there*, why there's a so-called key change *here*, why it suddenly goes up and down—all of that—because I have reasons. Now the actress may choose to ignore them, but Donna, who was just auditioning, did not have a chance to ask me, but she understood it. And this piece is psychologically very well laid out, and all it takes is a good actress to understand it exactly. It's one of the reasons why actors like to sing my stuff—because I'm essentially a playwright in song, and I'm not asking them to sing songs, I'm asking them to play scenes. It doesn't matter whether they're in thirty-two bars, or thirty-three bars, or a hundred-and-nine bars, or six minutes. One of the reasons it convinces you is because psychologically it's true. If I were writing this as a play—as a monologue—I would do the same thing: She would get grinding, grinding, and suddenly start stirring her coffee and get chirpy without any music at all. That's all. And notice there's only one bar where she gets to breathe before she changes tone.

MH: Why would making it one bar be noteworthy?

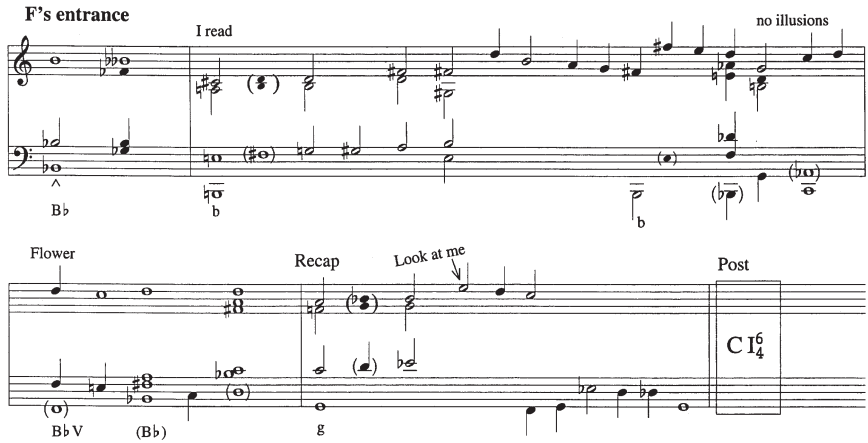
SS: Because ordinarily when you go into a new rhythmic section you give the audience a chance to hear the rhythm for a couple of bars. Not in opera obviously, but in a musical.

MH: Why didn't you give her the chance here?

SS: Because I think she's too hysterical. I think everything's got to be off-beat. I think Fosca's one of those people who, when you think she's going to be quiet, she screams; and when you think she's going to scream, she's quiet; and when you think she's going to cry, she laughs. She's completely

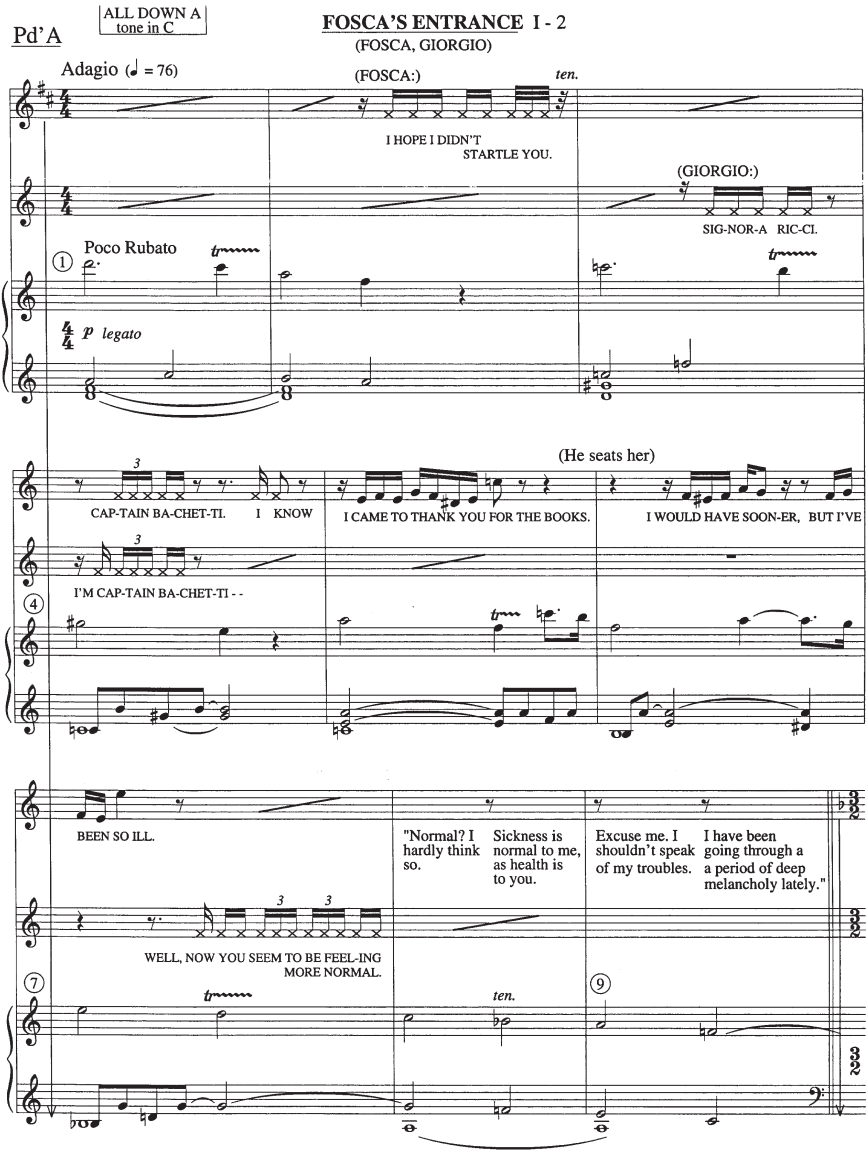
out of control—she's a loose cannon. What I wanted this opening number to do was to make the audience really frightened of her—to say: *Oy*, there's a bundle. And I think it does. I think at the end of this song they're ready. Because, you know what happens right after this song: she has this screaming, hysterical fit, which is one inch away from making the audience laugh, but because of the song that precedes it, they don't laugh. There was a tendency to giggle a little bit—to have a woman watching a funeral procession and suddenly scream and have an epileptic fit—because they're not prepared for it. But they are prepared for it because of this—because of that transition.

MH: My assumption is that this is one of your "long-line" sketches.

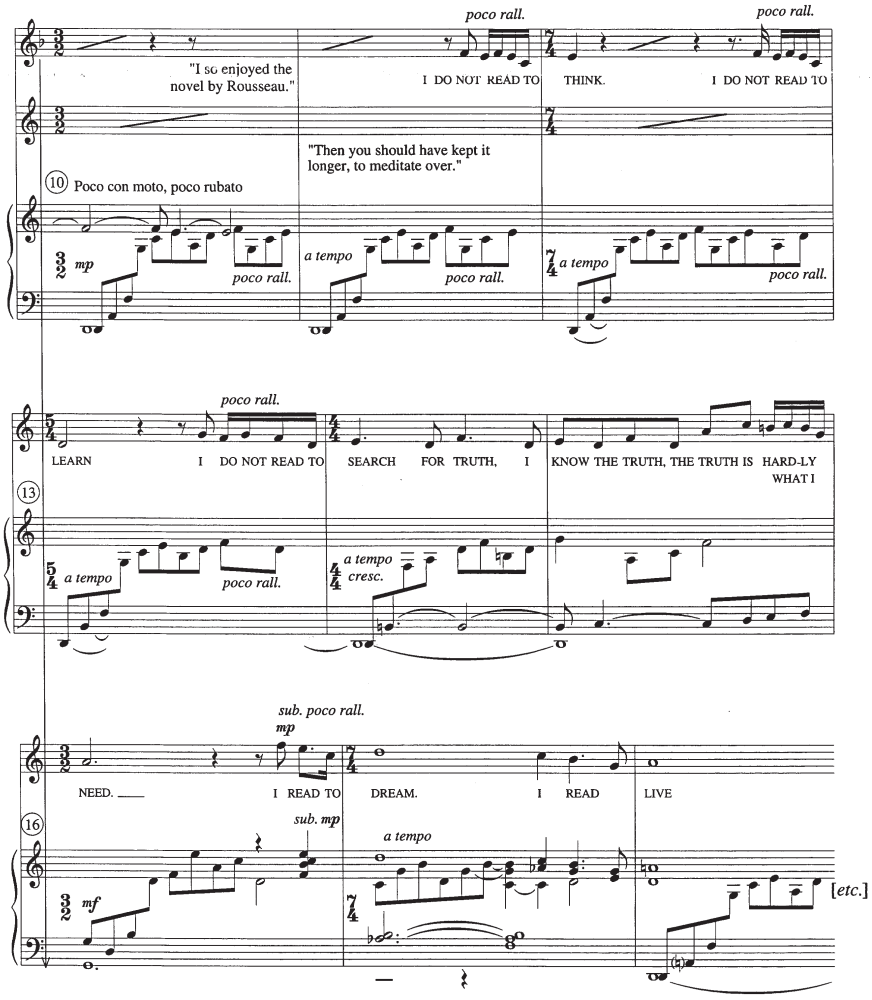


Example 1.12

SS: It sure is. I have to refresh my memory on this. Obviously I wanted to start with a nice B-flat. I must have had an idea, because this is odd—going to an A and an E there (or a B-double-flat and F-flat as I wrote it.) When I do a long-line sketch, I divide things into sections. The first section is clearly the "intro" before she enters. And obviously this B-flat either comes from the Clara section or from the Chopin music, but the point is this is where she comes in. Now I had devised a 7/4 arpeggio [see m. 12, Ex. 1.13]—and from what that implied, I started to work out the harmonic structure. The second section leads up to the lyric about the flower—"There is a flower . . ."—where there is a change of music both in texture and in register: it goes up into the upper octave, and also has a light waltz flavor which I wanted to use later at some point. So the second section of the sketch is really the first section of the song. Now,


Pd'A
ALL DOWN A tone in C
FOSCA'S ENTRANCE I - 2
(FOSCA, GIORGIO)
Adagio (♩ = 76)
(FOSCA:)
ten.
I HOPE I DIDN'T STARTLE YOU.
(GIORGIO:)
SIG-NOR-A RIC-CI.
Poco Rubato
p legato
(He seats her)
CAP-TAIN BA-CHET-TI. I KNOW
I CAME TO THANK YOU FOR THE BOOKS.
I WOULD HAVE SOON-ER, BUT I'VE
I'M CAP-TAIN BA-CHET-TI - -
BEEN SO ILL.
"Normal? I hardly think so.
Sickness is normal to me, as health is to you.
Excuse me. I shouldn't speak of my troubles.
I have been going through a a period of deep melancholy lately."
WELL, NOW YOU SEEM TO BE FEEL-ING MORE NORMAL.
ten.

Example 1.13



Example 1.13 (continued)

where you see the half-notes, it doesn't really mean a half-note, it's just for notation purposes—half note, C-sharp-half note, D-half note, F-sharp, and then to G-natural—and means that these sections are functioning as an outline.

MH: Is that melodically or harmonically?

SS: Harmonically. Because you notice all the thirds. And what interests me here is why I put the B minor at the bottom, because it doesn't really . . . with

the A-natural above, it doesn't really sound, but that's what that means. I wanted the Bs to be here. Obviously the scheme is to go from B-flat to B-natural to B-flat. So it has some kind of arc effect that way. And then, you think: What do those notes have in common? You see it leads to a G—it's G minor, but in fact G minor/major—and G minor has B-flat and G major has B-natural. So, that the whole passage is built on the alteration of B-flats and G. The "recap" I put in G minor for some reason, and went from G minor to B minor. Half-notes represent the inner motion of the harmonies. Quarter notes are sections within that. Let's compare this to the later manuscript and see if I've written it in a key where we can make some sense of what I intended. Oh dear, the later manuscript is in D minor. Obviously what I did was I worked this out and then I transposed it. I must have done that for range or register purposes. So, unfortunately, what we have is D minor. The way the sketch went from B-flat to B minor—the full copy goes from D major to D minor, I mean B-flat to B-flat minor, but . . .

MH: I thought it was a B-natural minor.

SS: B-natural minor. Sorry, in the sketch it is B minor. But the progression in this later version is from D major to D minor. D major being the verse. Now why did I change it? Let's see: it clearly opens with the Chopin—it starts out with a nice triad. And then it goes into D minor, but look, it's got a G-C-E [see m. 10 of Ex. 1.13]. And in the sketch it's B minor, but it's got an E-A-C-sharp. It's the same thing, it's just transposed. In other words, the first three notes in the arpeggio outline D minor, but on top of it I'm laying in another chord. If you hold your foot on the sustaining pedal down and play those first six notes you'll get that chord. It'll be transposed, but you'll get that chord. So clearly what I want to do is relate the major chord in the Chopin to this minor version of it. It softens it by bringing in the flatted seventh. I'm sorry it's transposed, because otherwise we could watch how the thirds move in the accompaniment figure. . . . I'm moving those thirds up and down, and the C and the E become a D and an F. The C-sharp and A become a D and B. They're parallel. The whole idea is to build it on thirds.

MH: To relate back to the military figure?

SS: No, I don't think so. I think it's because it's my favorite chord.

MH: What is?

SS: The kind of chord in which you take a triad and lay on top of it another triad and it's all within the same key. It's sort of a jazz chord is really what

it is. And it's unresolved which is what's nice about it. Ordinarily, in D minor, that would be a C-sharp, but by making it a C-natural it has a softer more fluid sound. And it's just something I like a lot.

MH: Do each of those subtleties—whether it's a C or a C-sharp—do they mean something to you intellectually, or is it emotional feel?

SS: It depends. Sometimes it's because of the way I've worked out the long-line, and sometimes it's just I like that sound better. A lot of music's chosen, I think—at least by me—just because I like it better. Because it fits the emotion better. And when you talk about: If you're writing the character, and I'm writing the character, a chord that suits you might not suit me and vice versa. A chord that conveys to you the essence of her character might not convey it to me. It's Rachmaninoff melancholy; this is a chord you find all the way through his music. It's that kind of Russian melancholy that has an "Oy . . . oy . . . oy" kind of feeling. And Fosca's feeling sorry for herself. As a matter of fact, I remember, I was worried about this becoming sentimental, because I wanted her to feel sorry for herself, but to be fierce. And that is why (if you want to talk about intellectual) I chose the melodic line to start with sixteenth notes instead of something slower. And this is against the eighth-note accompaniment. Ordinarily, one would match the melodic idea to the rhythm of the accompaniment. But here, I deliberately did not, because I wanted her to have these stuttering phrases over this melancholy Russian music. Now I didn't mean it to be Russian of course, but that's my idea of melancholy. So, that's the reason for the choice of that kind of stuttering melody as opposed to a flowing melody. Because she's sorry for herself, but she's pretending to be angry—not pretending, but she's sharp-tongued and short, and she's being contemptuous of him. And she says: "I do not read to think" because it's the only way she knows how to behave. She doesn't want to get soppy, I think. And she's fierce. But as the song goes on and she becomes more and more passionate about what she's saying, you'll notice the melodies change from sixteenth notes to eighth notes . . . as it gets to "search for truth, I know the truth" as opposed to "I do not read to think," which is the way it starts. And then, when she gets to "I read to dream. I read to live," she starts to become kind of Puccini-esque, expansive, because she's getting passionate. And it's precisely by falling into that that she realizes what she's doing. That's why she does that second part in that chattery attempt at charm. So what the long-line sketch is is a scheme of how I'm going to get from point A to point B—these transitions in her. Because when you make an emotional transition, it probably—I don't want to say that this is dogma—it should probably be accompanied, I think, by a harmonic transition of some kind—whether it's a transition from major to minor, or to a whole other key; what you call a modulation. It's interesting, Mil-

ton Babbitt never uses the word "modulation," he uses the word "tonicization." It means: We're going to make a new tonal center. And it's a much better word than modulation. There's something transitional or temporary about modulation. And maybe that's the way to use the word. For instance: We're going to modulate to E major before we go back to C major. But if you tonicize E major, you're really making a whole new statement in E major. I know this kind of harmony, which I've used before for a kind of melancholy, is something I like a lot. It's very pleasant and it's still sad.

MH: What would be behind the specific choice of the B-flat to the B-minor-natural to the B-flat to the G?

SS: It's because, if you look at the whole passage, all those bass notes are in a key and one passage even has an F in the bass. Some things I put in parentheses because I don't know if I'm going to state the note. But the point is it's a B-flat-V chord, and what I'm doing is alternating between B-flat and B, B-flat and B. The G is an attempt to find an accumulation which encompasses both those notes. Now, if I wanted to end the piece earlier—if I didn't want it to go on—I would have ended up with the B-flat. But I didn't. At the same time, I just don't want to go to another key in an arbitrary way—to go to A major or something like that. So the G is an attempt to sum up the statements in B-flat and B-natural. It's related—it's inevitable (well, I like to think of it as inevitable), but fresh. The point is, it is related, but it's new. It's not arbitrary. The fact that it goes into G minor is also not arbitrary. It somehow relates to the scheme—at least that's the intention. It may not work, but that's the intention.

MH: So, for instance, to go to C-sharp would not be related?

SS: No, of course not. Because C-sharp doesn't relate to both B-flat and B-natural. If I say: Include B-flat and B-natural. What do they have in common?

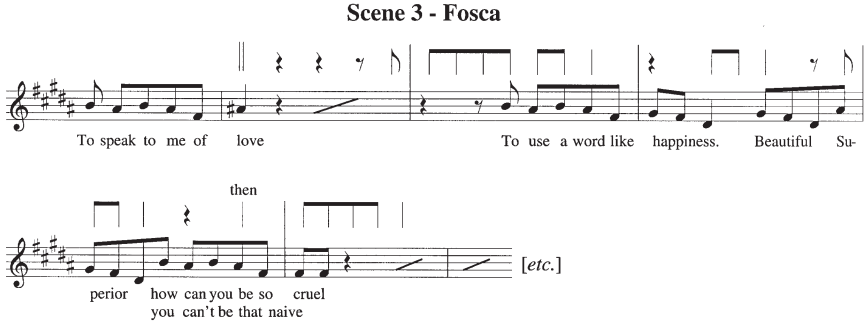
MH: But it could have been a D.

SS: It might have been, but a third is so much more powerful a statement than . . . well, a fifth would be okay, but then it would have to be . . . and then if you have D and D-flat you would have had a tritone in there—implicit. So that it wouldn't make the G quite as satisfying, I think.

MH: But if it's B minor and B-flat major, they share the same D.

SS: Oh, I see, you're suggesting that the D be the bass that it goes *to*. I suppose you could make a case for that. Sure, I see what you're saying. The trouble is the key of D minor has both an F and an A in it. The key of G minor has the B-flat. The key of G major has the B-natural. So the bass has both those notes in it. I hasten to add, it's only in extended pieces like this where I work things out in such detail.

MH: This is a sketch for "Scene III, Part III—Fosca," and what intrigued me here was the rhythmic notation above.



Example 1.14

SS: That's an alternate for whatever I was writing there lyrically—it's not a basic rhythm, it's a melodic rhythm.

MH: So it's just an alternate way of writing that same moment?

SS: That's an echo of Fosca's entrance theme—what leads into "to feel a woman's touch." What I'm doing here is trying to develop the melody and deciding whether I want it to be one way or the other. In other words, do I want a melodic grouping of notes to be at the end of one bar or the other? I think it comes out to the same number of notes so that whatever lyric I was writing would fit either of these schemes. The rhythm above is merely an alternate for me to consider. Obviously, whatever the lyric is, if I want it to be more pushed, I would use the rhythm which is a beat less. If I want it to have more breathing space, not for the singer, but for the emotion, I would use the other. But, you'll notice, they're really the same rhythm—rhythmic groups—it's just that one has been shoved over.

MH: How would you would make the final decision?

SS: I would have to see what the lyric was, and it would be based on: Does the thought really push itself ahead, or does the thought need a little air?

MH: So these are not primarily musical decisions?

SS: But based on the emotion of the lyric.

MH: Do you ever want to do one thing musically, but something else for the lyric?

SS: Yes. If that happens, then I change the lyric. But here, because this is a very arioso, very free passage, it's just as satisfying musically, I think—whether it comes in a beat earlier or not. It's still the same downbeat feeling—I mean when the downbeat occurs, I don't mean downbeat as an adjective. Whenever the downbeat occurs, it's still the same feeling. And also, sometimes it has to do with the emphasis on a word, because if it comes in on the second beat of the bar, it's a much weaker beat. So, if I don't want to emphasize that word, I would use one; if I do want to emphasize that word, I would use the other. So, sometimes it's determined by emphasis. Bear in mind, this is always in terms of arioso writing, it is not in terms of songwriting. Because songwriting has many more rigid rules—or it doesn't feel like a song. You can't just keep changing rhythms in a song and expect it to maintain its shape, because it is only thirty-two bars.

MH: Increasingly, I've noticed that you tend to change meters more frequently within a song than you used to.

SS: But that's because most of the shows I've written recently aren't song shows. The last song show I wrote, really, was *Merrily*. *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods* have songs in them, but they're not primarily song scores. *Into the Woods* is full of fragments that drift off. *Sunday in the Park* has extended sections. *Assassins* has a lot of songs in it.

MH: The "Ballad of Booth" includes a lot of meter changes.

SS: Really? I wouldn't say there are a lot of meter changes. Are you talking about the sentimental section or the Balladeer's section?

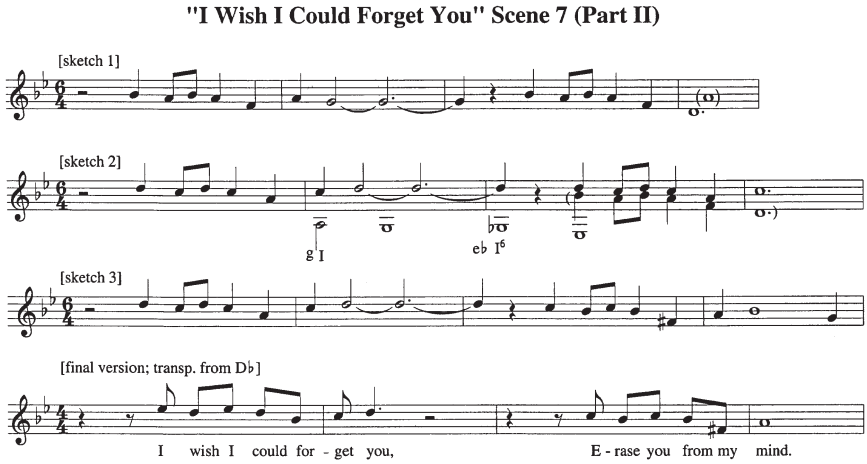
MH: Where the Balladeer sings "Johnny Booth was a happy fella . . ."

SS: I guess there are. But the feeling of that is square. Even though there are some meter changes, the feeling is fairly square. I know it changes occasionally from four to three, and maybe even five. But the feeling is square, because it has that steady rhythm in the accompaniment.

MH: Next is your sketch called "Scene IV," which is "I Wish I Could Forget You."

SS: When you said "Scene IV" it confused me, because ultimately this became "Scene VII"— which is how I think of it.

MH: What interested me here was the evolution of the melody, and I've done a chart that tracks your various sketches through to the final version.



Example 1.15

SS: As you know, this melodic idea is the basis of the show. That includes: "I do not read to think"; and that whole thing, rhythmically of [sings] or [sings] exists all the way—"to feel a woman's touch"; and in the opening lyric with [sings] "I'd die right here in your arms." I use this melodic motif, this germ, this cell, as they say, throughout the show, in many, many guises. Both rhythmically and in terms of the outline of the melody. Sometimes the note goes up and sometimes the note goes down, but, essentially, it's stepwise motion with a third at the end [sings] or [sings]—"To feel a woman's touch." Essentially, these opening notes are the same all the way through the show. Much of the score is a study in variations on those six notes. And it was conscious on my part to do that so that there would be some sense of repetition without its being repetitious—some sense of development, some sense of holding it together so it wouldn't just be a tapeworm—because I loathe recitative—so there would be some sense of melodic cement, or glue, holding the thing together. So much of what Fosca sings, and much of what Clara sings when they are in their love moods, is based on that motif. And Giorgio too. There are significant differences in harmony, but not in melodic outline.

MH: Going through the sketches, I was interested to note that the first three versions were in 6/4, which changed, alternating between quarter notes and half notes, before you got to the final version, which is all eighth notes. I assume that final decision relates to the kind of thing you were just talking about.

SS: I think I decided to relate it more closely to the opening and to "I do not read to think."

MH: And it wasn't until the third sketch that you got the F-sharp on "my."

SS: Oh, that's interesting. . . .

MH: Do you remember how you found that note?

SS: Sometimes one does that just because a melody sounds boring.

MH: But that's not the "wrong-note" thing?

SS: No. I just think it makes it a better tune. The whole idea of melodic writing—for me—is similar to what I was talking about earlier regarding harmony, which is: How do you keep it inevitable but fresh? How do you say you think this is going to be the next note, but at the same time it isn't arbitrarily out of the ballpark?

MH: How *do* you do that?

SS: I don't know. It's a matter of personal decision, and there would be other composers who would solve it differently. One composer who would say: Gee, I think that's a very boring way to end that little tune. And another composer would say: Gee, I think that's perverse. But for me, it's the right combination of perverse and non-perverse. But it requires trying out all these versions—the reason for all these sketches is precisely that. It's also: How do words sit on the music? Let's not ignore lyrics here. If you take this line: "I wish I could forget you," and sing it in that rhythm: [sings] "I wish I could forget you." It doesn't work quite as well as: [sings] "I wish I could forget you." Also, look at the difference in tone, even if I keep the rhythm exactly the same, just by taking the "you" down instead of up: [sings] "I wish I could forget you." It has a finality to it, as opposed to: [sings] "I wish I could forget *you*," which prompts us that something further is going on. At least to my ear. A lot of it has to do with being very careful not to end your melody before you want it to, or not to darken a tone of a lyric, because just the direction of one note can

completely change the tone of a sentence (although this is not a particularly vivid example). Even when the lyrics fit, even when they sit on the notes the way they should—and inflection is all-important to me, all-important—so it really is what the emotion's about. It's another reason actors like to sing my stuff; I inflect for them very well. Inflection's everything. Stress is another aspect: It's very hard to make things so they're not misstressed. I'm hardly impeccable on this, but I try to be. Most lyric writers, except for the very best, don't even bother—it doesn't bother them, it doesn't bother the audience—but it bothers me terribly when things are misstressed. You don't sing "night*mare*" you sing "*night*mare," and if the accent's on the *mare* it just bothers me dreadfully. But inflection is a subtler matter and very much a choice of course, because, again, there would be another composer who would say: Gee, I think this is exactly the wrong way to set "I wish I could forget you," I think that last note should not be a stepwise motion; I think it should be "I wish I could forget *you*" [sings a leap up]. The minute you go off stepwise—even if it's on an offbeat—you give a distinct emphasis to the word. If I go up a third: [sings] "I wish I could forget *you*," right away there's more accent on the "you" than [sings] "I wish I could forget you" is different than [sings alternate melody] if you set those words to it. It delays the rhythm by making those quarter notes. I think the reason I changed the meter from 6/4 to 4/4 was to echo more the sixteenth notes when she sang: "I do not read to think." And by making them eighth notes—instead of a quarter, two eighths, and two quarters—it relates the themes. And, I think, it's more conversational. It did mean that there was much more space between because the illusion of space in between those two bars is greater than just holding a note—even though this may be the same number of beats—when the tune is stretched out that waaaaaayyyy, and then the next phrase comes in there, it's much closer than [sings phrase], even if you hold the note [continues singing]. There's more air there, so you have to be sure that the lyric is going to accommodate that. In other words, you don't want a run-on sentence. Actually, each one of those phrases, ideally, should have almost a period; each one should be a separate sentence. But these clauses, "I wish I could forget you, Erase you from my mind" for me, tremble on the brink of too much space between a subordinate clause and a main clause. But I wasn't able to get two sentences. It fits the music much better if you come up with something like: "I wish I could forget you. I wish you'd go away," as opposed to "I wish I could forget you, Erase you from my mind." Where's the subject of the second one? Gone with the wind. So suddenly it's songwriting, as opposed to conversation. And for this show, particularly, I want it to seem conversational. It's a subtle thing, but it's things like that that lose kingdoms.

MH: How do you approach the whole process? If you're writing a song or an extended piece, you have your script pages, you know what's supposed to happen there. Do you then start with your harmonic long-line outline before the lyric, or does something else come first?

SS: It depends. I would say two-thirds of the time, maybe three-quarters, I will sit with a lyric pad first and just jot down notions that could, but not necessarily, be refrain lines but are central thoughts or things I want to say. Then I will often take the dialogue—because I usually write after the librettist has written the scene—and I will often set the dialogue on the piano and "let my fingers wander idly over the organ keys." [Note: Sondheim is referring to a poem by Adelaide Ann Procter (1825–1864)—'Legends and Lyrics: A Lost Chord': "Seated one day at the organ,/I was weary and ill at ease,/And my fingers wandered idly/Over the noisy keys."] More often I will get a melodic shape in my mind from what I'm writing lyrically, and that will often be the first musical notes on that piece. It will often not end up to be the actual tune that I use, but it has a set of stresses and inflections which echo or support what I'm trying to do. I am very helped if I can find either a harmonic accompaniment or a rhythmic accompaniment that will evoke what I'm trying to say. That's the reason to sit at the piano. And sometimes it's harmonic and sometimes it's rhythmic. The long-line is really about the harmonic progression. I don't really use that unless I have a long piece and I want to hold it together—something like the opening of the second act of *Sweeney Todd* or the opening of this.

MH: But the final melody comes from the lyric? And to get to that point, do you speak a line of lyric to get the inflection that you know you want, and do you use that to determine whether you want your melody to go up or down or whatever?

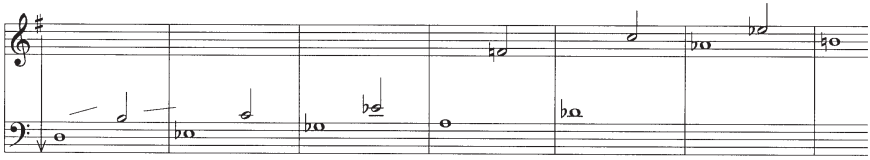
SS: Absolutely. Quite often, if you listen to the musicality of the language—the melody: "If you listen to this sentence. If you listen to this sentence. If you listen to this sentence," right away there's a melody. [Sings] "Badadadadadadum." You don't go: "Badadadadadadum." [Sings with downward inflection] "If you listen to this sentence?" It's: "If you listen to this sentence." Right away that phrase suggests a melodic outline and it suggests a rhythm. And if I were trying to set that—if I decide that that's an important line: "If you listen to this sentence"—I've got "Badadadadadadadadum," and I try to work out something from that. It's the musicality of the language itself that suggests the music—for me. The land of opera is filled with the reverse, in which you take: [sings with wide leaps] "If you listen to this sentence." But that's not for me.

MH: There are the various "Soldier's Scenes"—numbers 2, 4, 8, 10, and 11. . . .

SS: The idea was to use one tune over and over and over again.

MH: But I was intrigued by this one sketch for "Scene 10 for Soldiers."

Scene 10 (Soldiers)



Example 1.16

SS: "Scene 10" was my attempt to give some variety to this repetitive joke. This is where the soldiers are gossiping about what happened on the cliff when Fosca and Giorgio were caught in the rain. (Incidentally, the bugle calls I used throughout the show are authentic. I got the music for some Italian Army music bugle calls, and I also stole one from the movie because I figured that was authentic too.) This sketch shows a series of sixths, and a seventh and a fifth. What is that? This does not look like long-line to me. What this does look like is a series of chords over a pedal point. Let's see what I did here. I don't think I ended up really using this. This scene leads into the nightmare and I think what I did was, knowing from previous soldier scenes that they included these sustained whole-note chords, I wanted somehow to break them up so that we could fragment them and suddenly get into the nightmare which follows. This segues immediately into the nightmare music. So instead of going [he sings] "dum-baum-baum," it's "dau, dau, bau, dau." By holding the half notes over the whole notes you get dissonances, so that you know we're going to something dissonant. It starts off fairly consonant with sixths, and suddenly there's a seventh there, and then the fifth which is very dissonant with what's around it. So this is merely a sketch for an idea I had.

MH: To become more and more dissonant over the pedal point?

SS: Absolutely, yes. It starts with a sixth, goes to a seventh . . . And notice how quickly it goes out of the key—we're in G major, and there's an E-flat minor in the middle of it.

MH: You raise two points. First, authenticity: When you're doing period pieces, how much research do you do?

SS: What do I know about Italian bugle calls? Nothing. And granted the audience wouldn't know the difference either, but why should I invent them when they're in public domain? When they're authentic, why make one up? I listened to a lot of bugle calls—a lot, three dozen. I got a recording of military bugle calls by the Italian Army. Don't ask me how; I think Paul Gemignani, the show's conductor, might have gotten them for me. And there are four or five different bugle calls in the movie, and I figured if anybody knew what the bugle call for retreat and the bugle call for reveille would be, it would be Ettore Scola who directed the movie. So I assumed that he had done research and gotten some military advisor to say, "This is what you want." So I figured why not use them? And they became valuable because I utilized them; I didn't just use them as decoration. I took little rhythmic ideas from them and little melodic skips from them. Granted, it's always 1, 3, 5, and 1—I mean it's just triadic—but it's very useful. [Sings] "Bump-ad-y-ump-ump-ad-y-ad-y-ump." I wouldn't think that up, but that becomes useful. It suggests things. Not necessarily that I echoed that in a melody, but to use that *against* a melody. To know that that's the rhythm: "bump-ad-y-ump-ump-ad-y-ad-y-ump" is important or useful. So authenticity not for the sake of authenticity, but because it gives me something that I can steal from that is part and parcel of what I'm trying to do. I wouldn't take a Sousa bugle call; I would take an Italian bugle call.

MH: When you have a show that's set in a certain time and place, do you worry that certain chords or harmonies wouldn't have been done then?

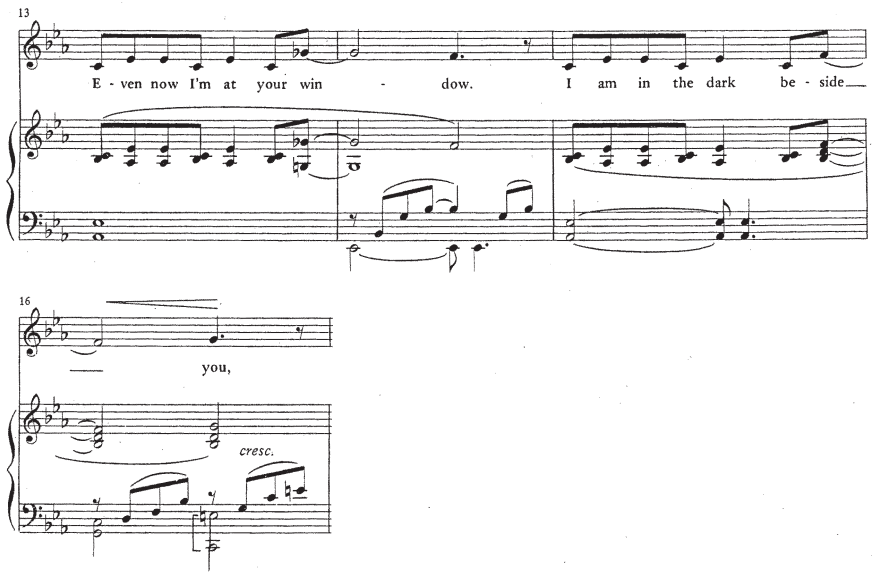
SS: It depends. *Pacific Overtures* is a perfect example. I went and I studied for two weeks in Japan. I also got some records of the various Japanese instruments that I knew nothing about. From that I decided that we'd use the *shakuhachi*, the *sho*, and the *samisen*. And I listened to them, and listened to the Japanese scales which are essentially pentatonic minor scales—as opposed to the Chinese which are major. And then I tried to devise music that essentially used those elements, but was, of course, tonal music—Western tonal music. You can't imitate Japanese music, because the intonation is everything in Japanese music—it has nothing to do with the notes. So in the first act of *Pacific Overtures*—when the music is, for the most part, Eastern—it *feels* like the music belongs in that show, in that milieu, in that country, as opposed to a show set in New York in 1960. That's my idea of the uses of authenticity. I think authenticity is useless otherwise. If I were writing a novel, that would be a whole other thing. In preparing for *Pacific Overtures*, I got a sort of daybook of various Japanese customs, traditions, and superstitions from John Weidman, some of which I used in the lyrics. They are authentic, such as a spider on the wall being a sign of success. At least it's authentic according to this daybook which

was printed in the early twentieth century, or maybe even later, by somebody who lived there, and so I have to assume it's authentic. And that's useful. It doesn't matter whether it's true or not, it suggests something exotic—in the real sense of the word. I think that's how authenticity can be useful. When I'm dealing with the old tunes from the Ziegfeld era, as I did in *Follies*, you listen to authentic Victor Herbert and Jerome Kern and utilize what they were doing. The same thing is true with language. One of the things we did with *Sunday in the Park with George* was that James Lapine very carefully wrote it so it sounds like a translation from the French. There are very few contractions in it—people usually say "cannot." It's slightly clumsy, and it's slightly stilted, and it seems to me just right. It prevents it from being colloquial in the wrong way.

MH: Did you follow that through with your lyrics?

SS: I tried to. Again, if your ear is sensitive, and mine is, to the nuances in the language, you can tell when something sounds twentieth century and when it doesn't. And I'm not talking about "ain't," I'm talking about something subtler than that. There are aspects of the lyrics that are slightly stilted—and deliberately so.

MH: In the song "Johanna" in *Sweeney Todd* there's a surprising blue note. Was it a tough decision to use that sound?



Example 1.17

SS: Yes. And I'm not sure I made the right decision. Sometimes, you make a choice, because all the other choices seem less good. It may not be ideal; and maybe, if I'd searched longer, I would have found the right note there. I was aware of that blue note, but everything else sounded either repetitious or boring or expected—expected in the wrong way, meaning flat, meaning anti-climactic. That note sounded slightly startling, and you're not the first person to point it out. It may have been a mistake.

MH: It's my favorite moment.

SS: Maybe that's because you're perverse. Seriously, can you explain why it's your favorite?

MH: I remember sitting in the theater the first time I saw *Sweeney Todd* (the recording hadn't come out yet), and I literally got chills up my spine at that moment.

SS: That's great, but it's partly because you were startled. If you'd heard a saxophone in the middle of it, it might have done the same thing.

MH: But for that point in the show too, it made me nervous—it just played out with everything else that was going on on the stage.

SS: One of the things that blue note does is it makes the next phrase really telling: [sings] "da-da-da-da-da-da DAH-dah, da-da-da-da-da-da DAH DAAHH." Suddenly the sun comes up with the change from minor to major (or "major to minor" as Cole Porter said, better than I). Incidentally, that happens in lyric writing quite often: you know that you've got a really good third line, and you can't make the second line so good, but it isn't so bad, because the second line's being a little weak makes the third line stronger. There's a lyric of Cole Porter's in *Kiss Me Kate* in "Where's the Life That Late I Led?" where he says: "It's lucky I missed her gangster sister from Chicago." That line simply doesn't belong in any way, shape, or form in that lyric, and I thought: I wonder if he deliberately did that to make the rest of the lyric brilliant? Which is by having one terrible line, all the other lines say: Wow! I don't know. I don't think he was that devious, but I wouldn't put it past him—that he might have written that and thought: Gee, that line doesn't belong in this song, but what the hell, it'll make the ones that are *really* elegant sound *more* elegant.

MH: When you write something that's intentionally startling, do you ever worry about the fact that over time, it won't be startling anymore?

SS: No, I never think about that. And incidentally, I didn't use the note to startle. It's because I was looking for something warm and something that wouldn't anticipate the B-natural. (I remember it was a B-flat.) [Note: The published version is a third lower.] I didn't want to use the B-natural in front of it. And at the same time, if I used an A it was too flat; and I wanted it to be below the note that was coming. You know you don't have a lot of choices. You've got a B there you want to get to. Well, you've got a B-flat and an A and then you've got an A-flat and a G. What else? Now you know Kern was notorious for finding exactly the right note. (Was it Flaubert or Stendhal who talked about *le mot juste*?) Oscar Hammerstein used to describe listening to Kern play the first eight notes of the chorus for "All the Things You Are" and trying each possibility for the ninth note. Kern would try every single note of the scale, and once he hit it, go on to the next phrase. And that's what I did, I tried every note and I couldn't find one. Kern might have found a way of starting the phrase differently so it could have a different resolution.

MH: Do you often do that?

SS: Oh, yeah! Absolutely. Every possibility. First I look at what the scheme is that I'm using and what belongs. Usually the scheme will dictate it. But sometimes it's just dramatically unsatisfying—it's the right note, but it's not fresh. It's inevitable, but it's not fresh.

MH: So in "Opening Doors," in *Merrily*, when you have the character of the composer trying out the thirty-two different harmonizations of his theme, is that really how you approach it?

SS: You got it. That's what I do. That's my big autobiographical number; everything in that number is me. That's exactly what he's doing—he's trying everything out until he gets it. I don't know how many other composers work that way (I've never talked about it to any other composer of my own generation, and I haven't read enough about composers in the past), but I'm sure that Kern was not the only one to do this. He can't have been. I remember Oscar describing how it would drive him crazy, being in the next room, trying to write lyrics, and he just kept hearing this thing go over and over again, day after day after day, until it sounded fresh. Which is what's so great; you hear "All the Things You Are," and you can't imagine that he worked on it at all!

MH: Getting back to the "Soldier's Number," there's one other thing I want to bring up: It seems that as your work evolves, your textures