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WORDS AND MUSIC: COMBINING TWO UTTERLY DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

by Anthony D'Amato

In Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, Amanda remarks "Strange how poignant cheap music is." [FN1] This would not seem to be the most promising lead-in line to a song, especially not when the person who wrote the line also wrote the music and the lyrics to that song, as well as the play, and especially not when he was himself starring in the original London production of the play, and was about to play his song on the piano. However—rising to his own challenge—Coward played very un-cheaply while Amanda (Gertrude Lawrence) sang the beautiful "Someday I'll Find You." Their *tour de force* was one of the outstanding moments in the history of the theater. [FN2]

There are not many cultural memes that have the power to become part of our minds the way our favorite songs do. When we hear a song from a happy moment in our childhood, or one that was played insistently at the high school prom when we temporarily or permanently fell in love, "nostalgia" is too weak a word for the wave of emotion that washes over us. The "catchy" tune that runs around in our mind, and sometimes foils our efforts to extract it, is the hallmark of this most accessible of aesthetic forms. The melody seems to go with the lyrics inseparably; it is hard to hum the tune without "hearing" the words. But although or because popular songs, or even just "songs," are almost by definition easily accessible, they have been quite recalcitrant to academic investigation. [FN3] In this essay I'd like to suggest some ways we might analyze the mysterious art of wedding a verse to a tune. As in a wedding between humans, when it works it's made in heaven.

An early edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica defined "song" as:

the joint art of words and music, two arts under emotional pressure coalescing into a third. The relation and balance of the two arts is a problem that has to be resolved anew in every song that is composed. [FN4]

Indeed we often have the feeling in listening to or humming a favorite song that the words and the music were *meant* to go together. Thinking of one immediately conjures up the other. In a song as catchy as, say, Rodgers' and Hart's "Blue Moon," the lyrics almost seem to *be* the tune. Yet in fact Richard Rodgers originally had set the tune to an entirely different lyric—also by Lorenz Hart—which their producer rejected. [FN5]

One tendency in talking about a composition like "Blue Moon" is to explain it as serendipity, a lucky collaborative inspiration on the part of lyricist and composer. But we know from accounts by both lyricists and composers that getting the right melodic phrase to go with the right verbal phrase is hard (though gratifying) work. Sometimes it's the work of a versifier chopping syllables out of words to make them fit the tune; sometimes it's the work of a musician modifying a melody to fit the metered accents of the words. Yet the result of many composer-lyricist collaborations is a workable but not particularly artistic song. For every song we remember there are thousands we don't. In searching for the most poetic examples to illustrate the themes of this essay, for the most memorable and evocative songs I knew, I found at least to my own satisfaction that the highest percentage of the most felicitous marriages of words and music were made by the much smaller group of composers who also wrote their own lyrics.

And while I can't claim to be "right" about something so subjective as whether a song is good or not, I do think it's fair to say that on the basis of popularity—which is of course not the same thing as common consent—this same elite group of composer/lyricists keeps coming up.

In a way this finding makes sense: those lyricist-composers were working in the musical and verbal languages at the same time, and thus their raw materials were plastic. In contrast, a separate lyricist and composer enjoy the plasticity only of their individual language; each must hope for an inspired reaction from the other. But this doesn't mean that a composer who works with a separate lyricist never hits the combination just right. The question in every case is: what makes a song aesthetically pleasing?

I suggest that the most artistic and satisfying songs come from an active combination of words and music, speaking together, as it were, in their utterly different but perhaps complementary languages. There are perhaps many ways of looking at the relationship of words to music. What I'd like to do here is suggest three categories, or three foci, which might open up the analysis of the aesthetics of song: "rhythm," "versification," and "self-reference. These admittedly casual labels should underscore the fact that I am making no claim to categorical exhaustiveness. Nor will I try attempt a thorough study of the individual categories—though I will spend the most time on the third and perhaps least familiar one. And of course there are other and larger limitations on what I can say. The combination of words and music may well be as old as language itself, and today there are as many—if not more—distinct and unique species of song as there are languages. I don't think anyone would seriously claim to have even a general grasp of the entire subject, and I don't think it's likely that any native of a given culture can appreciate more than a tiny fraction of the nuances and meanings of the song-traditions of a different one. The primary cliché about music is that it's a universal language—but even if this is true, song certainly is not. So I'm restricting myself to songs written in English—and also mainly to works written in the mid-20th Century—not because this body of work is in some way definitive, but because it's the only tradition of which I could claim to have more than a general knowledge. Nevertheless, one can at least hope that thinking about this tradition might point towards some general truths—if it's possible to use the word. My goal is to encourage further research into what the Britannica called "the problem that has to be resolved anew in every song."

I. RHYTHM

This first and most obvious category would also seem to be the most venerable. The rhythm of a song broadly suggests its emotional mood. Rhythm is so fundamental, in fact, that it at least seems to be almost hard-wired into our nervous system: for instance, when we hear music in 3/4 time—a waltz—we feel what seems to be a universally shared impulse to dance to it. Whether anyone from any culture would feel this is obviously debatable. But it's hard to resist saying that there's something intrinsically lilting and frothy about a waltz. Most people would probably add that there's something romantic about it, maybe because of its association with a certain type of dancing, or maybe because of an intrinsic quality that predates or determines this type of dancing. And of course if we go to an operetta by composers such as Johann Strauss, Franz Lehar, or Sigmund Romberg, we expect to see dance and romance. [FN6] It follows that lyrics connected to a waltz tend to express these same sentiments of sprightly affection. When they don't, it seems rather jarring. One might argue, for instance, that setting the lyrics of "The Star Spangled Banner"—which Francis Scott Key wrote as a poem during the War of 1812—to the tune of a beer-hall waltz called "To Anacreon in Heaven," which had as its first line "When Bebo Went Down to the Regions Below," was actually not a very felicitous idea for a national anthem. Certainly it starts to seem forced when we get to the line "Whose broad stripes and bright stars." And by the time we reach "banner yet wave," we find that we are given four syllables that need to be strung over seven separate

notes. Every time I hear the national anthem I wait to see how the particular artist handles this problem. Some do it well; some mangle it (the worst mistake is to add yet one more note, making a total of eight, by stretching out the word "banner" as if it reads bah-ah-ner-er). The anthem itself is invariably performed slowly and dramatically so that the underlying waltz tempo can be masked if not suppressed. [FN7] It was not too surprising when Robert Goulet forgot the words at the Super Bowl.

Like dance-tempo waltzes, martial music also does not seem to attract noteworthy or memorable lyrics. For example, Dorothy Donnelly, who wrote some very nice lyrics for Sigmund Romberg's ballads in her operetta "The Student Prince," was only able to come up with the following introduction to his marching song:

To the inn we're marching,
For our throats are parching,
Under fruit trees arching
In the month of May.

This kind of lyric, these days, might elicit a shout from the audience: "if you stop singing your throats won't parch as much." But back in 1932 audiences took it in stride. It would not have been easy for Donnelly or anyone else to find words to fit the demanding cadences of Romberg's march. In nearly every instance of a marching song, whether in 2/4, 4/4, or 6/8 time, we tend to remember the music and not the words. This is perhaps a pragmatic test of generally failed marriages between words and music within the specialized genre of martial music.

There is also a broad relation of musical tempo to lyrical content. A song whose lyrics express a kind of giddy happiness is, apparently across all cultures, signed by an allegro or allegretto tempo. A song expressing romance is slower, in andante cantabile, for example. A very sad song such as a dirge is set to the slowest tempo—lente or adagissimo.

If rhythm and tempo are fairly obvious connections to the meaning of the attached lyrics, key is even more obvious. A song in a major key seems to be bright, happy, positive, whereas a minor key suggests sadness. Yet the moods induced by keys seem less universal than those induced by rhythm or tempo. Mid-Eastern music, for example, weaves in and out between major and minor keys. Indian music partakes of this free-floating kind of signature. It seems that the moods induced by different musical keys are largely a function of the culture in which the songs have flourished and the common associations that have been attributed to the various kinds of songs within that culture.
The comparative musicology of signatures is a field of aesthetic research in itself. I shall revisit the major/minor dichotomy with an illustration at the end of this essay.

The foregoing observations, while well-known, serve here as a placeholder for the primary importance of tempo and rhythm. The very incongruousness of setting a love poem to martial music demonstrates that not just any lyric that "fits" can be set to any given tune. Rhythm and tempo dictate, with a few degrees of freedom, the verbal theme of the song. However there is a cautionary note. Just because we associate a certain content with a familiar song does not mean that the rhythm of the same tune cannot be changed to suit an entirely different purpose in a country that is not familiar with its original verbal content. Thus S.J. Perelman remarked in the 1940s that in his travels through India the favorite military song was "Easter Parade" by Irving Berlin, set to a marching tempo. He noted the incongruity but at the same time recognized that the Indian Army, perhaps not knowing the original lyrics, was obviously delighted with this "parade music" from the United States.

II. VERSIFICATION

In most songs, the prosodic elements are extremely simple. The tune typically follows a steady pattern, and the words are fitted in cookie-cutter fashion. Elementary prosody could be taught to students by using just the lyrics to popular songs. When we listen to a song and the words don't quite seem to fit, we are apt to regard it as a mistake rather than an example of interesting or even beautiful versification. In general, popular song simply lacks the prosodic values that we find in the best poetry. Shakespeare's sonnets, for example, would be hard to fit to music, precisely because their best moments are variations from the fundamental iambic pentameter. And meaning-related rhymes, found in poems like Milton's *Lycidas,* are virtually impossible to duplicate in song because songs rely for their memorability on recurring repetitions of musical phrases. The composer can't easily change the melody to make the lyricist's rhyme work; Milton and Shakespeare did not have to concern themselves with melody.

Writing a verse isn't difficult; Hallmark Cards turns them out by the storeload. Fitting the verse to a tune isn't particularly difficult either; it's a bit like doing a crossword puzzle. The task is even easier if it is not necessary to make the words fit exactly—as seems to be the case in most of contemporary "rock" music. I've already mentioned the example of "banner yet wave" which must be sung to seven separate notes. Grand opera is replete with these semi-fitted verses—the operas were often written quickly, the libretto usually came first, and the composer fitted the tune "roughly" to the libretto. If certain syllables didn't work out—well, divas liked to take liberties with the libretto anyway, so a mismatch between words and music simply presented the singers with a creative challenge. If the words when sung were sufficiently incomprehensible, it didn't matter too much. Besides, the acoustics in those days were not very good. [FN8]

But some of the best examples of "fit" in the popular song repertoire are those where both the lyric's syllables and the music's notes come as a mild surprise. In those instances we don't quite expect the "fit" to work so well, and when we hear it, we appreciate the creative parallelism and it sticks in our mind. An example is Irving Berlin's "Oh How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning" from his 1918 army musical, "Yip Yip Yahank." Its chorus follows an ABAC pattern; that is, the first 8 bars of the verse are the "A" pattern, the next 8 bars a "B" pattern (cleverly incorporating musically the three "natural" notes on the trumpet which untrained army buglers find easy to learn), the next 8 bars a repeat of the "A" pattern, and then the final 8 bars a new "C" pattern which is both partially expected (given the foregoing melody) and partially a surprise. The most innovative thing about the final 8 bars are two three-note sequences that accompany the words of the penultimate two lines:

I'll amputate his reveille
And step upon it heavily

Musically the notes for "reveille" surprise us; we are then delighted to hear a wholly original rhyme "heavily" with the same *sequence* of notes one tone below the previous one. [FN9] The ingenuity of this construction contributed to the huge popular success of the song, and people everywhere were sing-quoting the above two lines. But more important for our present purposes is the unexpected coupling, both musically and verbally, of the words "reveille" and "heavily." If a separate lyricist had written "Oh How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning," she might have rejected that rhyme even if she had conceived of it, for the simple reason that it did not "scan" in the verse itself. On the other hand, if a separate composer had first written the music and turned it over to a lyricist, it is hard to imagine that the lyricist would have come up with those particular two words. Lyricists usually resort to a rhyming dictionary or their own proprietary list of rhymes, and none would have likely contained this new rhyme. Indeed the lyricist would probably have complained to the composer that the line in the tune itself does

not scan properly (as Gilbert often complained to Sullivan). As a result, the creation of the "reveille-heavily" line might have fallen between the two proverbial stools. But somehow Berlin, who invariably wrote his own lyrics to his own music, came upon the happy combinatorial inspiration. As soon as he performed the marriage between "reveille" and "heavily," no man could pull them asunder. [FN10]

A related but different use of a fresh melodic sequence to match a word is found in Frank Loesser's musical "Where's Charley?" The word is "devastatingly," a five-syllable monster inserted into a love song to dramatic effect. The big difference between this example and Irving Berlin's is that "devastatingly" is not rhymed with any other word in Loesser's song "Lovelier Than Ever":

Springtime,
You haven't changed your way of whisp'ring,
Whisp'ring that romance lies in store,
Springtime,
You're being devastatingly clever,
And lovelier than ever before.

Loesser wrote his own words and music. If there had been a separate lyricist and composer, the lyricist would surely have written the fifth line to accord with the meter of the second line. Instead, as Loesser wrote it, line five is quite poetic and not the sort of line one might find in a song. Somehow Loesser must have conceived of the words and the music at the same time. The word "devastatingly" comes as a penultimate and highly deliberate climax, the word itself being fitted to five consecutive descending harmonic notes. [FN11] The rapid descent, like tumbling down a set of stairs, brings the listener rather devastatingly to the bottom line.

Melodically, Loesser had foreshadowed this five-syllable sequence by another equally polysyllabic word in the first half of the chorus: "irresistible." It is accompanied by a sequence of notes that is not descending, but rather uses a single note repeated three times for the last three syllables of the word. It sounds at once insistent—the word "irresistible" is drummed at you and even repeated—but melodically it is incomplete.

Springtime,
You're looking lovelier than ever,
Lovelier than ever before.
Still irresistible in the same old gown of green,
Still irresistible as that lilac-scented scene
When I was seventeen.

We wait expectantly for a musical completion of the sequence. And we get it, several lines later, in the word "devastatingly" which, because of its steadily descending notes, is not at all insistent but instead sets up the final line of the song. The happy result is poetry in music.

One of the finest uses of an extra and unexpected syllable appears in Irving Berlin's "Soft Lights and Sweet Music" from the 1931 show "Face the Music":

Soft lights and sweet music
And you in my arms.
Soft lights and sweet melody
Will bring you closer to me.

Chopin and pale moonlight
Reveal all your charms.
So give me velvet lights and sweet music
And you in my arms.

It is hard to imagine a separate lyricist coming up with "velvet" in the penultimate line. For one thing, the word "velvet" violates the unwritten rule that one should repeat exactly the title of the song as often as possible in the lyrics but never alter it. Moreover, it's not clear what "velvet lights" means. And it doesn't fit the meter of the line, so most lyricists would not have conceived of it at all. But as his own lyricist, Berlin had creatively fashioned a synonym for "soft" lights by using "velvet": the listener expecting to hear "soft" in this line attributes its meaning to the word "velvet." But the important point is that Berlin modified the tune so that "velvet" had an extra musical lilt to it. The result is a memorable line greater than the sum of its parts.

A variation on this theme is the insertion of an entire word that serves as a the extra syllable. In Noel Coward's "Operette," the composer-lyricist inserted the word "swiftly." It is hard to imagine a separate lyricist coming up with that insertion because it violates the metric of the entire stanza. Only a lyricist-composer, it seems, could simultaneously fashion an appropriate change in the melodic line to accommodate that word:

Where are the songs we sung
When love in our hearts were young?
Where in the limbo of the swiftly passing years,
Lie all our hopes and dreams and fears?

To "get away" with this insertion, the singer has move up the tempo; but Coward has provided perfectly apportioned notes to assist her. The word "swiftly" sung to a momentarily quicker tempo conveys the fullness of its meaning—a brief but bona fide marriage of meaning and melody.

III. SELF-REFERENCE

The illustrations of songs I have used so far all have words and music that seem to go well together. We have a feeling that the mood and meaning of the words is reinforced by the accompanying melody. However, we are still hearing two different languages: words and music. The bridge that exists between them is one of form but not of shared meaning. Thus a next step suggests itself: what if the words and music of a song explicitly refer to each other? Can the lyrics call attention to the very song in which they occur? And can the music, in turn, seem to be saying "Yes, these are *my* lyrics"?

The concept of self-referential statements has interested philosophers since 1931 when Kurt Godel proved his famous impossibility theorem. Godel invented a mathematical sentence, or formula, that said of itself that it could not be proven within the axioms of the mathematical language in which it was embedded. A simple example of this idea, provided by Douglas Hofstadter in his book Godel, Escher, Bach (NY, 1979), is the sentence" "This sentence is false." Unlike most of the sentences that we read or utter in our lifetimes, this particular sentence turns inward and refers to itself. Moreover, it is logically paradoxical: it is a true sentence only if what it says about itself is false, and it is a false sentence only if what it says about itself is true. Paradoxical sentences like this would not work well in song: if the lyrics deny what the melody seems to say, the song would simply strike us as absurd or badly constructed. Rather, the model for songs would be the other kind of self-referential statement that provides its own verification, such as the sentence "This sentence contains five words."

An early and rather simple kind of musical self-reference can be found in many operas and operettas where someone is singing a love song whose lyrics proclaim that it is a love song that he or she is singing. These are not difficult to compose, which is attested by the fact that many of them are written by a separate lyricist and composer. A neat instance (though now a bit stuffy) is Oscar Hammerstein's lyric to a Sigmund Romberg tune from the operetta "Viennese Nights," in which the love song that the singer wants to "bring" to his lover is the song itself:

I bring a love song, only a love song,
Shy as a day in spring,
Trying to tell you all that it knows--
All that a heart dare not speak, songs may sing.

Born in the moonlight, fed by caresses,
Our song should never die,
Keep it caressed, dear,
Hold it always to your breast, dear,
Don't let our love song die.

A promising example from country music written in 1975 by Larry Butler and Chips Moman was:

Hey, won't you play another
"Somebody Done Somebody Wrong" song?

Here an outer song, one might say, is talking about an inner song. The outer song would have been better if it itself had been a song about the singer's being "done wrong" rather than just a song about an inner song he felt like hearing at the time. But hey, who can quarrel with a platinum album?

Alan Jay Lerner wrote an explicit self-referential lyric for the ill-fated Broadway musical "Love Life," music by Kurt Weill, where the song that is sung is the song that is being sung about. Here is the last stanza:

I sing a song about forever,
Only a song about forever.
Sing of how empty hearts forever long.
But nobody listens to my song.

Yet in all the foregoing examples there is only the broadest kind of connection between the words and music. If the song refers to a love song, then the music is a romantic tune: usually in a slow tempo and a major key. A closer connection was attempted in a song about a waltz: Dorothy Donnelly wrote the lyrics for duet and chorus in her operetta "The Student Prince," music by Sigmund Romberg:

Just we two!
If they knew
How in the waltz we woo;
Memories all in vain
Echoing still again,

While the waltz

Swells and halts,
Singing of love's sweet pain.
Haunting tune
Ending too soon,
While we say adieu.

Although the music is, indeed, a waltz, it is not necessarily a "haunting tune." And to say that it "swells and halts" seems to have no particular meaning in any of the performances or recordings of the song that I've heard. There is nothing in the original score calling for volume or tempo changes in the song. Rather, we retain our suspicion here that no special attempt was made by the lyricist and composer to get together on wedding the words to the music. However, they did fit exceedingly well.

But there is one early example where the lyricist and composer successfully joined forces in creating a mutually self-referential song. Gilbert and Sullivan's trademark "patter" songs were often criticized as being sung too rapidly on stage to be comprehensible to the audience. So in one instance, in "Ruddigore," the team turned their satire inward and composed a patter song about their own patter songs:

This particularly rapid
Unintelligible patter
Isn't generally heard
And if it is it doesn't matter.

Sung quickly by a trio, the song elicits enthusiastic reprise requests from audiences, and one time I'm fairly sure I heard, in one of the reprises, the embellishment: "this particularly vapid unintelligible patter." An improvement, perhaps, when you've heard the lyrics repeated for the umteenth time, but nevertheless a distinct violation of the idea of self-referentiality. What makes self-reference work in this song is the actual *rapidity* in which it is sung—one that gets faster with each reprise.

Irving Berlin's "Say it with Music" from the 1921 production of "Music Box Revue," starts by telling us in the verse that

Music is a language lovers understand,
Melody and romance wander hand in hand.

This leads up to the chorus, which urges lovers to

Say it with music, beautiful music,
Somehow they'd rather be kissed
To the strains of chopin or Liszt.

A melody mellow
Played on a cello
Helps Mister Cupid along.
So say it with a beautiful song.

If the song itself were not "beautiful," Berlin's chutzpah would be unbearable. But in fact it turns out to be an extraordinarily beautiful melody. The three notes accompanying "Somehow they'd" are, as far as I know, unique in the world of song. [FN12] The first note on the partial word "Some" is given a minor chord, the first use of a the minor key in the major-key song. Even for those who do not read music, the

following chord notations suggest the unusual far-off semisweet romantic sounds:

(Song in the key of Eb):

Some- how they'd
(Abm) (Gbm6) (Cb7)

It is haunting, unmistakable, and memorable. If you want to speak love, you can "say it" with this song! The title, if we were only interested in self-reference, could be changed to "Say it with This Music."

Although Irving Berlin lived for 99 years, and was justifiably acclaimed as the most successful commercial songwriter of all time, his songs were rarely taken seriously as works of art. Wilder says that Berlin "is the best all-around, over-all song writer America has ever had." [FN13] As Irving Berlin himself shrewdly commented about movies, "The best pictures are those that make money. They become artistic later." [FN14]

In 1919 Florenz Ziegfeld hired Berlin to write the score of the Ziegfeld Follies of that year. At the last minute Ziegfeld found that he could not work into the show a bunch of costumes that he had ordered, so he asked Berlin to write a song about beautiful women who would then sashay around in those costumes. Overnight—remarkably—Berlin wrote "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody." It became the centerpiece of the show. The simile of a pretty girl and a pretty melody lodged itself into the popular mind. The song comes right out and pleads to lodge itself into one's mind:

[A] A pretty girl is like a melody
That haunts you night and day.

[B] Just like the strain
Of a haunting refrain

[C] She'll start upon
A marathon
And run around your brain.

[A] You can't escape, she's in your memory.
By morning, night and noon

[D] She will leave you and then
Come back again
A pretty girl is just like a pretty tune.

This song practically self-defines the idea of "catchiness." The tune that I've labeled the "C" section is particularly joyous and memorable, as it gives a bit of a jazzy tempo to a song—a kind of "release"—that in its other sections is a straight-forward ballad. The "release" resonates with the two measures in "After You've Gone" (a 1918 popular song by Henry Creamer and Turner Layton) that Alec Wilder noted "are as American as a song can get." [FN15] Berlin's words and music that "run around your brain" was apparently so catchy that radio audiences in the 1920s voiced their complaint about too many rebroadcasts of the song, saying that it came on the radio just as they had successfully finished in dislodging it from their minds.

The format of the song, which I've labeled in bracketed letters, is relatively unusual (the normal pattern being AABA). However, [D] is fairly close to [B]; only
a few notes are altered—reasonably in light of the fact that in [D] the song is nearing its end. The final word "tune," normally a weak sound with which to end a song, gains strength from the fact that we expect to hear in its stead the word "melody" from the title of the song.

Despite the melodic changes in the song's format, the song has a "drive" that impels the listener to keep paying attention. Berlin accomplishes this by the use of dominant seventh chords at the end of the [A] and [C] sections. [FN16] These are chords that remain "unresolved" when we hear them; we feel up in the air and need to be brought down to ground level (technically, we need a downward resolution to the tonic chord). It is hard to find another example of a song whose chorus contains a seventh chord at the end of both its [A] and [C] sections. Berlin reached deep into his bag of tricks to do it. Thus, when you repeat to your self "run around your brain," the segment does not resolve itself. You either hum it over again, or you proceed to the rest of the song. It is almost a like a self-replicating virus, though that is surely an unpleasant term to refer to the power of this triumph of self-reference. And to top it off, just in case someone is able to dislodge the song from his mind, the next time he sees a "pretty girl" the song may "come back again," just as it says it will. It is a song that was simply designed to make money, and it did.

There have to be one or two flaws in it; after all, Berlin had less than 24 hours to compose the song. The word "marathon" was perhaps a bit strange, although it seems more out of place today with its Olympic Games familiarity; back in 1919 when it was rare, it must have seemed a more exotic and romantic-sounding word. At least the rhyme—"marathon" with "start upon"—was totally original. Moreover, the word "noon" is troubling. When you've said "morning and night," why is there any need to single out "noon"? And if "noon," why not "midnight"? [FN17] But Berlin had a somewhat intractable problem. He could not end the song with the word "melody" because it would have been what in prosody is called a "feminine" ending (actually, considering the lyric, that would have been appropriate!) The word "tune" was the obvious candidate for ending the song, but what word would rhyme with it that would be contextually appropriate? "Noon" was the inspired solution, and I doubt that many people ever thought twice about it. A cultural meme as powerful as this song tends to some extent to make its own rules.

In 1943 Berlin revisited the idea of "she will leave you and then come back again" in his song for the movie "Blue Skies":

You keep coming back like a song,
A song that keeps saying "Remember."
The sweet used-to-be
That was once you and me
Keeps coming back like an old melody.

The phrase "the sweet used-to-be" is, I think, sheer inspiration. Yet the song lacks combinatorial ingenuity, as if Berlin by the 1940s was losing the old touch. Even the tune for "You Keep Coming Back Like a Song" is conventional; it is not "forced" by musical apparatus like dominant seventh chords and it does not contain the kind of jazz break that formed the catchiest segment of "A Pretty Girl." But it is a beautiful tune, even if the attempt at self-referentiality did not fully succeed.

One that did succeed brilliantly was "The Song is Ended" which Irving Berlin wrote in 1927. The chorus deserves quotation in full:

The song is ended, but the melody lingers on.
You and the song are gone, but the melody lingers on.
The night was splendid and the melody seemed to say,
"Summer will pass away: take your happiness while you may."

There 'neath the light of the moon
We sang a love song that ended too soon.
The moon descended, and I found with the break of dawn,
You and the song had gone, but the melody lingers on.

The sheer ingenuity of the triple rhyme—"ended," "splendid," and "descended"—is enough to proclaim that this is no ordinary popular song. More important is the sentiment. This is not the flighty "pretty girl" who "leaves you and then comes back again"; it is closer to the Cheshire cat who has gone away leaving its grin behind. The lover who sings the song associates it with the romance of a summer night when a love song was sung. We are sure that the melody of that love song is the selfsame melody we are hearing now: it is the power of suggestion impelled by the implied self-referentiality of the song itself. That love song which was sung on the summer night and the romance that was part of its magic are now are expelled by the light of dawn; the intertwined sentiment of the referred-to love song and the romance fade away together. Yet somehow *this* melody remains. It lingers on. Why, exactly?

The concluding phrase "melody lingers on" ends, remarkably, on the fifth interval in the scale. [FN18] In other words, musically the song has not ended; it is unresolved; it leaves us expecting more; it seems to linger on. As if to underline this point, five out of the six notes covering the phrase "melody lingers on" are the same repeated note (the note G if the song is in the key of C). [FN19] The only way we can bring it to resolution in our minds is to *repeat* the second stanza (starting with the "break" line "There in the light of the moon"). And so, humming along (often below the conscious level during a busy day), we repeat the second stanza of the melody in our minds, only to find at the end that it remains unresolved and thus requires another repetition. And the words we "hear" as we hum the song tell us that the melody we are humming lingers on. A masterpiece of self-reference—the very definition of "catchy" music!

If there is a remembered poignancy about a melody lingering on after the romance is over, what about an unrealized romance? Berlin adopted the sentiment of an unperfected romance in what I believe is the finest self-referential song in the popular canon. In 1930, he wrote the title song for the motion picture "Reaching for the Moon":

[A] The moon and you appear to be
So near and yet so far from me.
[B] And here am I on a night in June
Reaching for the moon and you.

[A] I wonder if we'll ever meet,
My song of love is incomplete.
[C] I'm just the words looking for the tune,
Reaching for the moon and you.

Probably no metaphor could be more poignant to Berlin himself, whose whole career and satisfaction came from writing popular songs, than "I'm just the words looking for the tune." The singer of "Reaching for the Moon," we expect, is a human being hopelessly in love. But we could also imagine the "singer" as being the words of the song. What if the "song of love" that is "incomplete" is this very song? What if we

take Berlin literally when he writes "I'm just the words looking for the tune"? The music gives us a clue. It is written in a minor key. And it tells a story, the story of an abrupt shift to a glorious and unexpected major key over the words "on a night in June," a bright ray of hope, a sense of momentarily reaching the moon (which seems so near). And yet the next line reverts once more to the minor key, the sad key. And there it stays for the remainder of the song. The unexpected (and unprecedentedly beautiful) five major-key notes over "on a night in June" are gone, an extended reach that failed, a sudden hope that is dashed. The melody that started on a minor key philosophical note [A], then became hopeful as it reached for its lyrics ("the moon") [B], then fell back to philosophical rumination [A], finally ends in minor-key resignation in [C]. But the momentary hope of [B] is uncannily mirrored in the first line of [C], where the tune—though it remains in a minor key—reaches very high, with the note accompanying "tune" being the highest pitch in the entire song, before tumbling back to earth in the final line. If we accept the suggestion that it is the words that are doing the talking in this song (and not the singer who happens to be singing those words), and we go along with the idea that the words are searching for the sheer and elusive melody of the song, we obtain a perspective on intrinsic self-reference in the art form of the popular song.

There is one magic trick in the repertoire of self-referential songs that is the "topper," the equivalent of the magician's assistant turning into a lion at the end of the show. It is the most self-referential marriage of words and music that I have ever heard, but the trick can only be performed once—and only in one phrase of a song. Once done it can never (apparently) be repeated. It would be fitting if Irving Berlin invented this one. But it was Cole Porter—who like Irving Berlin, Noel Coward, and Frank Loesser was a lyricist-composer—who came up with this gem of self-reference.

Cole Porter's song is "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye," from the forgotten 1944 musical "The Seven Lively Arts." Near the end of the song is the following stanza:

There's no love song finer,
Yet how strange the change
From major to minor
Ev'ry time we say good-bye.

The song is signed in a major key, but when the word "minor" is sung, the tune shifts to the minor key. The music tells of sadness as the lyrics speak about saying goodbye. Here words and music are one and inseparable.

There is nothing in the many biographies of Irving Berlin to suggest that he ever heard this particular Cole Porter song; he apparently never commented about it. Is it possible that Berlin, the master of self-referential music, could have been unaware of such an explicit example of self-reference? I always imagined that Berlin would have turned green with jealousy if he had heard Porter's song, but I could find no documentary evidence that he ever had. But I did find the answer recently, I found it in a song. There is a virtually unknown song in the Berlin repertoire entitled "Everybody Knew But Me." Berlin wrote it a year after Porter's song was published. It contains the lines:

We were in a minor key,
We were bound to disagree.

The song as a whole is in a major key, but the line "We were in a minor key" is, as we would expect, in a minor key. The self-reference is a bit clunky compared to Porter's poetic use of the magic trick. Porter's song is unique, Berlin's an homage. Although Berlin obviously was not able to "top" Porter, it is clear that he rushed to compose a song in which he would musically tip his hat to the composer of "Ev'ry Time

We Say Goodbye." He said it with music.

Footnotes:

[FN1] Even Coward might have been dismayed by how cheap popular music would become in the age of the Internet. MP3 and other Internet downloaders now enable the free copying of music. However, these Internet providers are currently being sued by associations of royalty owners, and teams of technicians are hard at work on systems of making copying difficult or at least traceable.

[FN2] "Someday I'll Find You" is among the rarest of melodic constructions in popular song; the melody does not repeat itself. Jerome Kern's "Sally" and Irving Berlin's "Lazy" and "The Girl on the Magazine Cover" are the only other examples that I have found of this particular tour de force.

[FN3] Even Alec Wilder in what is now regarded as the classic work on popular music is virtually silent on the connection between words and music—despite his obviously sincere appreciation of good lyrics and his painstaking analysis of melody. See Alec Wilder, American Popular Song (NY 1990).

[FN4] Quoted by Ira Gershwin, LYRICS ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS 362 (NY. 1959).

[FN5]"Prayer," by Richard Rodgers & Lorenz Hart (1933). It began:

Oh Lord!
If you ain't busy up there
I ask for help with a prayer
So please don't give me the air.

The producers of a Jean Harlow movie shrewdly rejected this song, and within a year Hart had produced a new lyric:

Blue Moon
You saw me standing alone
You heard me saying a prayer for
Someone I really could care for.

It is rather difficult to come up with a suitable spondee for the first line to fit the two notes Rodgers provided. Here's where I would get stuck with such an assignment:

Spondee
You bring such trouble to me;
You heard me making a farce with
A different meter to parse with..

[FN6] The "Russian" variation of the waltz, which consists of heavy accenting of the first of the three beats, signals an especial romantic exuberance, as in the song "He's In Love" from the musical "Kismet" -- which Richard Wright and George Forrest adapted Borodin's music for that show.

[FN7] Irving Berlin hoped that his "God Bless America," a song in standard 2/4 time, would become the national anthem. Despite considerable agitation in the new song's favor in the 1940s, Congress passed a resolution making "The Star Spangled Banner" the official national anthem.

[FN8] Oscar Hammerstein II said that he counted on poor acoustics to hide the pedestrian lyrics he hurriedly wrote for the "Riff Song" opening the operetta "The Desert Song" (music by Sigmund Romberg). Hammerstein was later shocked to hear the recording of this song, where each word could be heard distinctly.

[FN9] For the musically inclined, in its original key of G major the notes respectively are ECB, and DBA.

[FN10] Irving Berlin employed another unusual rhyme in a song we've already considered, "Easter Parade":

On the Avenue, Fifth Avenue,
The photographers will snap us,
And you'll find that you're
In the rotogravure.

[FN11] The original key was Eb major; transposing to C major for present purposes, the notes accompanying "devastatingly" would be: EDCBA.
[FN12] Ten years after Berlin wrote "Say It With Music," Duke Ellington wrote "Mood Indigo," which contains a similarly strange harmonic construction over the words "*Till you've had that* mood indigo." The notes are so unexpected that many bands, playing by ear and faking the song, miss the notes and chords entirely. They simply play them as if conventionally written. One might expect a similar mistake in casual performances of "Say It With Music." Just once, listening to Muzac piped into an elevator, I heard that precise mistake.
[FN13] Wilder at 120.
[FN14] Michael Freedland, Irving Berlin 209 (NY 1974).
[FN15] Wilder at 27.
[FN16] The [C] section actually ends in a major ninth, which is simply a dominant seventh with an enriched note in the ninth position in the scale. And the [B] section as well contains another kind of unresolved chord, a G major seventh.
[FN17] Berlin later (in 1925) came up with a happier temporal triplet in his immensely popular song "Always":

Not for just an hour,
Not for just a day,
Not for just a year,
But always.
[FN18] To visualize this, consider the fact that nearly every song in the key of C ends on the note of C. If "The Song is Ended" were written in the key of C, it would end on the note of G.
[FN19] The repeated note is not at all characteristic of an Irving Berlin song, so there is no question that Berlin employed the idea here to keep the song unresolved. Repetition of a single note, as Alec Wilder points out, is a characteristic of George Gershwin's music, giving it a "drive" all its own. However, I believe that Cole Porter must hold the record for the most consecutive repetitions of a note. The verse of "Night and Day" begins with 35 repetitions of the note of Bb ("Like the beat, beat, beat of the tom-tom...") Although as far as I know no one has ever mentioned it, Porter might have intended this tour-de-force as a spoof-homage to Gershwin.

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