

Stephen Schwartz Gives Advice to Songwriters

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The following questions and answers are from the archive of the StephenSchwartz.com Forum.

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SECTION 1 - Career Development and Training

Establishing Yourself as a Professional Songwriter

Question:

What is the best way to go about establishing myself as a professional songwriter?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I wish there were an easy answer to your question. I guess the best answer I can give is to keep writing, to be really tough on yourself when you write and to go back and rewrite what you think is not good enough about a song until you're satisfied it's the best you can possibly do, and then to try to play your songs for people who might be of help to you: other musicians, singers, club owners, people in bands, etc. You can hire singers and a recording studio to make demos of your best songs so you can send or give them to people. If you're talented and perseverant, eventually this will yield results. That's about the best advice I can give; as I say, there's no easy step-by-step route. Best wishes with your songwriting. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Career Advice

Question:

What advice do you have for aspiring composers of theatrical music, besides all that "learn your craft" stuff (which I think I have) and "listen to every kind of music" (already there) how does someone without connections develop the networking savvy and know-how to be in the right place and right time when they have little or no portfolio/credentials to show their stuff to and to whom would they show it?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Aspiring Composer: The advice I have to give seems obvious, but it is nevertheless what I have continually observed to be the most useful.

First: write a show. That is, have some actual product you can show people, rather than simply being someone who describes him-or-herself as an "aspiring composer". Be an actual composer. It would be better if the show were something to which you eventually could have the rights, so I would advise avoiding adaptations of works which may prove problematic from a rights point of view in the future. But frankly, even if this particular show is something you can't get rights to, it still can lead to future

opportunities. I know of a specific case where a very talented writing team did an adaptation of the film "Lost in America"; they were unable to get the rights to go forward with this project, but it led to several other writing jobs for them and effectively launched their careers.

Second: Get yourself somewhere where shows actually get produced. Most obvious of course is New York City. But there are also Chicago, Toronto, Seattle, Los Angeles (and some other cities as well.) The point is you want to be somewhere to take advantage of whatever networking possibilities arise as you try to interest people in the show you have written and in yourself as a writer.

After that, there are many things that can happen and every individual "success story" is different. But you'll find these first two ingredients pretty consistent. If you have something you have written and you're in a place where work can get produced, with talent and perseverance, you can get yourself to the next step. I've seen it happen countless times. Good luck, and I hope this advice has not been so obvious as not to be helpful. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Musical Writing Questions

Question:

I am 16 years old, and have been composing for 3 years now. I earlier composed classical works, but then found musical theater and love it. I especially love your show Wicked, and I'm going to see Godspell very soon. What I would like to ask is, what exactly did you do when you began composing music for the stage? Did you write out a full show, or did you begin by creating songs for specific situations. I am currently doing a mixture of both, but both of these have had mixed results. What do you suggest?
Thanks, Byron

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Hi Byron: I'm not sure I exactly understand your question, but I assume you are asking about writing a full score for a show as opposed to individual "pop" songs. I think both are useful -- I certainly did both when I was in school and was starting out trying to be a songwriter. I worked on shows and wrote scores for them (four of them while I was at Carnegie Mellon, and one before that when I was in high school, although it was never produced.) But I also did things like writing a campaign song for a friend running for high school student council, and of course individual songs for friends to sing, etc. The point is that the more experience you get writing songs for all purposes, the better. As I said, I don't know if I'm answering the question you wanted me to, but perhaps these thoughts will be useful to you in any event. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Next composer

Question:

Hi Mr. Schwartz, I read in your bio that you got your BFA in Drama at CM, and I was just wondering what your emphasis was and how that took you to where you are today. Currently I am a music major at Hunter College, and I also trained at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy. I love to perform, but I think I have more to offer the theater world with my knack for songwriting. What is the best way to train for that sort of career? Also, I wanted to say that I have always enjoyed your style and the way you build your harmonies (I've done a number of your shows) and I thought Wicked was the overall best Broadway show I've ever seen. Kudos to you!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear JJ: I was actually in the drama department (directing major) at Carnegie Mellon, having studied music extensively before that (in private lessons and then at Juilliard in the preparatory division.) But it

sounds as if, with the combination of your AMDA and Hunter College training, you are doing something similar.

I have often said, though, that the best training I received was writing four original musicals while I was at Carnegie for an extra-curricular club called Scotch 'n' Soda, which presented a totally-student-produced original musical each spring. My recommendation would be to look for something like that at Hunter (or if it doesn't exist, perhaps see if there are other students who would be interested in doing an original show, which you could write or co-write.) In other words, I think the best way to learn about writing is to write something and see it presented in front of an audience, even if only in the form of a reading. That to me is far more valuable than all the classes in the world. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Choice of Major

Question:

Mr. Schwartz, I'm a high school student, and I've recently been checking out colleges. I really love composing, and I especially love writing musicals (I'm a huge fan of your work, by the way). I read that you were a musical theater major at Carnegie Mellon (which I recently visited) and I was just curious as to what you think your experience would have been like there if you had been a composition major instead of a drama major, and was wondering if you've any advice for me as to whether it would be wiser to choose a music major over a theater major or visa versa. Thanks so much!~Katie (P.S. The opening six chords of Wicked are possibly the most fantastic ever to start off a musical! I just had to say that...haha)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Katie: I think it depends on whether you feel you need more experience in theatre or music to achieve your career goals. By the time I went to Carnegie, I knew I wanted to write for the musical theatre, and I had had a lot of music theory training but no formal theatre education. So I went for the drama program, and it has served me well. But your specific needs may be different. The music department, by definition, will concentrate more on classical music theory, twelve-tone writing, computer music, etc. They probably will not be particularly encouraging to your interest in musical theatre writing -- you will have to find ways of doing that outside the department (as I did when I was at Carnegie, since at that time, the drama department was strictly classical theatre and did not do musicals at all!) The drama department will focus on acting, directing, design, and other aspects of theatre, but won't really help you further your music education. So it really has to do with where you think you need to focus. It may be possible -- I don't know -- to be in the drama department but take a music composition class as an elective, or to be in the music department and take a history of theatre class or some such. But in general, I would think about where you feel you most need to increase your knowledge and skills, and go for that. Good luck! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Avant-garde music; composers taking composition classes

Question:

Dear Stephen: I have read in your biography that you studied composition at Julliard. I was once a composition major myself. Sadly, I stopped just last year partly because the college's curriculum is strictly restricted to avante-garde music. Now, I have nothing against avante-garde music. In fact, while I was at the university, I had come to appreciate it for its artistic value. But the fact remained that avante-garde music just wasn't my thing. I just didn't have the PASSION for the music... It wasn't something I could stake a lifetime on.

I remember my professor (who was a Julliard student himself!) saying something to this effect: "As composition majors, we've got to make this kind of music, because this is what serious composers all

over the world are now making..."

Is this true? Were all (or most) of your composition subjects centered on avante-garde music (i.e. minimalism, serialism, ala John Cage, Philip Glass, et. al.)? What do you think about these kinds of music? I'd really appreciate if you'd get opinionated on this subject!

Thanks for reading. Trex

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

To be perfectly honest, I'm not a big believer in composers taking a lot of composition classes. I think it leads to the writing of academic, self-conscious music. I think it's useful to know about what other composers have done, to know basic music theory, and some orchestration perhaps. But that's it. I'm also not a fan of what is sometimes referred to as "avant-garde" music, and I don't actually think it will have much of a shelf life. However, I would not put Phillip Glass in that category (nor Steve Reich, John Adams, or John Corigliano, for that matter, all of whose work I happen to like very much.) I'm talking more about the John Cage kind of theoretical music that seems more like stunts than composing to me - I always considered him sort of the Evel Knievel of composers. Is that opinionated enough for you? Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Advice on Writing Musicals/College/Carnegie Mellon

Question missing

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think the best way to learn how to write for musical theatre (and to find out if that's something you want to do) is to write a musical. Since you are in college, this is an excellent time to explore the unique opportunities that are open to you for the next few years. Whatever school you are at currently, it's likely there is either already an existing extra-curricular organization that presents shows and might want to present an original musical, or there are likely to be enough interested students that you could probably put together at least a staged reading of a new musical you might write. I strongly advise you to try to do that.

While I was at Carnegie Mellon, I wrote four original musicals for an extra-curricular organization called Scotch 'n' Soda, and it was the best experience I could possibly have gained for becoming a professional. In answer to your specific questions:

Question:

Are there any schools or programs out there that may assist me?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Many. NYU has an excellent program for musical theatre writers. There are BMI workshops in NY as well that teach musical theatre writing (the ASCAP workshops of which I am artistic director also do, but they are for more advanced writers who have already written or are in the process of writing a musical.) But several schools such as University of Michigan, Northwestern, several schools in Boston, Cincinnati Conservatory, Julliard, etc. would afford opportunities because of their strong theatre and music departments, even if they don't have a specific course designed for musical theatre writing.

Question: Where did you learn your composition and were there any books or materials that helped you?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Most music departments have theory classes. I went to Juilliard while I was in high school, but also had a pretty solid theory basis from my private piano teacher. I didn't study "musical theatre" composition per se, nor frankly would I recommend it. But I did learn the basics of music theory and listened to a lot of music I liked and which influenced me. You can learn an awful lot listening to the work of theatre writers who have come before you and noticing structural techniques and all sorts of little craft tricks that you can incorporate into your own writing without becoming derivative or losing your personal voice. There are books out there about writing for the musical theatre, and in fact, I plan to write one myself based on my ASCAP workshops. There is an old one by Lehman Engel that is a little dated and is also dogmatic in terms of his insistence on certain clichéd forms, but can be very informative if you don't take it too literally. There is also a more recent one by Tom Jones (lyricist of "The Fantasticks" among other shows) that contains many useful ideas and food for thought. I don't know the titles of either offhand, but they should be easy to track down by the name of the author.

Question:

Did you find Carnegie Mellon a good school for musical theatre and what were the requirements to get it?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Yes, and it is better now, because the Drama Department actually deals with musical theatre, which it didn't when I was there. But it is an excellent school, and I had a great experience there that has proven useful to me for my entire career.

Advice on Becoming A Composer

Question:

Hi! I'm fourteen years old, and you are my favorite composer/lyricist. I want desperately to write musicals and plays and see them appear on Broadway, just like you. However, I don't have any "connections", and I am very shy. So I have two questions: How can I get noticed? and What should I do to overcome my fears? Thank you!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for your message. I also had no connections when I started out, though I admit I've never been too shy. But the good thing about wanting to be a writer is that it doesn't matter if you're shy or not. The thing would-be writers have to do is to start writing. As I have often told, I was lucky enough to go to a university (Carnegie-Mellon) that had a club that put on an original musical every spring; co-writing the show the four years I was there was the best experience I could have had and led directly to my getting started in my professional writing career. And I was just on a panel last week with composer Stephen Flaherty, who told about writing a show that was performed in his high school while he was a student there. The point is to start writing, and then trying to overcome your shyness enough to show your writing to people whose opinions you value and/or someone (a drama teacher, a choral director, etc.) who may be able to help you get some of it performed. I hope this advice proves helpful to you. Good luck! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Advice on Career Path/Theory/Composition/Orchestration classes

Question:

My questions are about my career path. I haven't always wanted to be a composer, I mean of course I thought about it but I never really tried it. I've always been a piano player and I don't really know HOW to compose? and I realize it comes from the heart and sometimes thin air... I can't seem to develop my

ideas that i come up with and i think i have so much potential and it frustrates me to no end! i do ALOT of transcribing and arranging for different events, most notably i recently arranged 5 pieces for the Youth Olympics opening ceremony that was held in Sydney.

Im 19 now and just finished school. Im trying to decided what i should study at university, or trying to establish a goal for myself to aim for. id really love to be a film composer, not so much with songs, but with just the music? Much like James Horner or John Williams or any of those fantastic writers. The reason im asking you is because you went to Julliard and as far as i know its the pick of the bunch when it comes to music colleges! (am i wrong??)

What study path would you recommend? or would you recommend something else? any suggestions? Thank you so much if you find the time to read this and reply,

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It sounds to me as if you could stand to take some theory and composition classes, and perhaps some orchestration as well. I don't know what your major was in school, but is there a music school nearby, or a private tutor, you could study with? I think that would be of considerable use to you if you are thinking of pursuing a career as a film composer. My one caveat would be to beware of a teacher or a program that tries to force you too much into a particular style of music, particularly if it's one you don't gravitate to naturally. I hope this advice is helpful. Best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

Strong Theory Minimal Skills

Question:

Mr Schwartz, I have the strongest desire to write a musical. I have a story, characters, plot hooks...the whole nine yards all ready to go. I have one small problem though, my piano skills are minimal at best. I play many instruments and sing as well and I have a very strong music theory background. I can hear everything in my head that I would like my songs to be, though I cant play them to save my life. Other than learning to become an accomplished piano player (which i do not have the time or resources to do) what would you suggest as my best route in being able to write my music? Thanks in advance for any advice that you may be able to give.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Well, among the very successful Broadway composers who had minimal piano skills were Irving Berlin (who had a special piano built for himself which transposed, since he could only play in one key) and Richard Adler or Jerry Ross, I forget which, but one of the composers of DAMN YANKEES and THE PAJAMA GAME, who apparently tapped out his excellent tunes on a toy xylophone, or so legend has it. Mel Brooks also comes to mind, having won a Tony Award for his score for THE PRODUCERS without extensive piano skills. In all these cases, these talented gentlemen worked with someone who could help interpret what they were hearing and prepare music for others to be able to perform. That might be a route for you to go. Or of course you could find a composer with whom to collaborate, and stick to book and/or lyrics. Anyway, those are some thoughts in answer to your question. I wish you the best with your project. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Reply from a Forum visitor:

Lionel Bart, the composer of "Oliver!" couldn't read or write music nor play an instrument. He sang his songs into a tape recorder and someone would transcribe the melody and then they would add chord structure/harmonies later.

Getting Started and the Role of Persistence

Question:

How did you get started, and do you think someone today could become a composer/lyricist following the same path?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I do think that the path I used to become a professional composer/lyricist is still the one that most aspiring writers I know (and I come into contact with many through the ASCAP Musical Theatre workshop I run) are using. It is, very simply this: write a musical. Go to someplace where musical theatre is actually happening, such as New York, or to a lesser extent, places like Chicago or Los Angeles. Start trying to get people to listen to your musical. You will begin to make contacts and meet people and eventually, if you have talent and more importantly persistence, things will start to happen. I do think that being part of a program such as the BMI or ASCAP workshops is useful, more in terms of the contacts you make than in the techniques you learn, though I obviously believe the craft issues are important too or I wouldn't be teaching them.

Response from Peggy:

It's an intriguing thing to think about. Do you think there are a lot of people who have "made it" who perhaps aren't necessarily very talented but are extremely persistent? (I won't ask you to name names!) I'm sure there are a lot of talented people who haven't made it, and probably don't have the persistence to try. Do you think there's a point at which, no matter how persistent a person is, they won't make a name for themselves because of lack of talent? Just some thoughts and questions that were floating around in my poor sleep-deprived brain. Peggy

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Peggy: Yes. I have seen many astoundingly talented people not succeed for lack of persistence. I have also seen less talented people go very far indeed because of their persistence. I'm not sure that it is possible really to make a name for oneself if one is completely talent-free. In a case like that, all the persistence in the world may not be enough. But very few of us are Mozart, or Paul Simon or Joni Mitchell for that matter. Let's just say that the combination of talent and drive is far more likely to lead to success than one without the other. Hope this answer lets you get some sleep now. Best, Stephen Schwartz

Question for Michael/Stephen re ASCAP

Question:

Hi Michael and Stephen, I think Michael, you may be able to answer this, and if not, if Stephen gets a chance to look at it I would be very grateful, so here is my question: I am planning on attending the last ASCAP Musical Theatre Workshop this Wednesday, April 23. Is there any way for me to meet Stephen afterwards? I have never been in the ASCAP building, so I'm not sure what the facility is like, if the floor the workshop is on has an actual theatre, or it's in a room with a piano and stage and audience area, or what... If you could fill me in on this and/or how I could meet Stephen, that would be great!

Also, I'd like to comment on how user-friendly this site is, and how open and generous you are with fan posting!! Some composers don't like to be bothered or are very generic and unenthusiastic in replying to fans. Stephen, from what I gather from these posts, is so EXTREMELY SWEET AND GENEROUS WITH HIS RESPONSES! I appreciate that so much, I can't even explain, being an aspiring actress, singer, playwright, and composer myself. Keep up the good work! (musically and with the website) All the best, Erika

Answer from Michael Cole:

Dear Erika: Of course you can meet Stephen after the ASCAP workshop. It's much like a classroom and when it's all over, everybody mingles, so make your way to Stephen and introduce yourself! Thanks for your kind words about this site. Stephen has really enjoyed the interaction with his fans - which was a nice surprise for him. Not until we created this site did he ever feel really connected to those who enjoyed his works - so, he enjoys it as much as you do! Keep posting and have fun at ASCAP. As always, let me know if there's anything I can do for you. Best, Michael Cole

Question:

I'm completely in the dark. What is an ASCAP workshop and how does one get to attend?

Answer from Carol de Giere:

Stephen Schwartz serves as artistic director for the annual Disney/ASCAP Foundation workshops in Musical Theatre held in Los Angeles in January and February and in New York City in April and May. In advance of the workshops, composers and book writers submit works in progress for review. A few are selected for short presentations at the workshop sessions. In front of an audience of aspiring writers and others, Stephen Schwartz, with his panel of professional songwriters and industry leaders, provide feedback on the shows being presented that evening. [See ADDITIONAL RESOURCES section below for a link to more info]

SECTION 2 - Various points: the musical book, getting started on a musical, etc.

Finding a Collaborator

Question:

How can I find a collaborator?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Visit ASCAP's Collaborator Corner at <http://www.ascap.com/collaborator/>

Acquiring Dramatic Rights To a Novel

Question:

I'm really excited to begin work on a new show (actually, I've written a few drafts of songs already), but it's based on a book. How do I go about inquiring about or acquiring the rights to the novel. The author is deceased, so I'm assuming I'd have to hire a lawyer to negotiate with the author's estate or something like that. Also, what are these arrangements usually like? Do the creators of the stage project pay the author's estate, or is the estate entitled to a percentage of any eventual profit, or is it some of both? Does it depend on the individual situation? Any insight you would be able to give me on this subject would be greatly appreciated. I really think I've found a way into the story, but I don't want to write a whole score only to have it sit on a shelf because I can't legally try to get it produced. Thank you!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Underlying rights are always a slightly tricky proposition, so yes, you definitely should have a show business lawyer who is knowledgeable about such things negotiate the eventual deal. But you may not need to involve one yet. Assuming the novel is recent enough that you are certain it is not in the public domain, the first thing to do is find out who actually controls the rights -- it may be an executor of the estate, it may be a lawyer for the estate, or it may be one or more of the heirs, etc. If you contact the publishing company who puts out the novel, you should be able to get information as to whom you need to be in touch with about theatrical rights.

Once you know who, try phoning or Emailing them (since it will go much faster if you can make contact that way rather than by mail), and tell whomever it is that you are interested in taking an option on the theatrical rights. (You may need to do something to prove yourself to them -- submit an outline and a couple of the songs that you have already written, for instance. But obviously, I would not bring that up unless necessary.) Once you know that the rights are available and whoever controls them is amenable to your taking an option on the work, it is time to involve the lawyer.

Generally, the way these things work is that a relatively modest option payment is made to secure the rights for a certain period of time -- usually around two years. At the end of that time, you can usually extend the option for another limited period of time for an additional payment, and sometimes with a demonstration of progress towards a production (you have a producer, or a director, etc.) Once a production occurs, the holder of the underlying rights customarily receives a continuing royalty and is considered one of the authors for purposes of subsidiary rights payments, etc. The royalty may be the equivalent of half of the book writer's royalty, or in the case of a well-known work, equivalent to the same percentage as the book writer. But these are things that your lawyer will negotiate.

Above all, DO NOT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES give them any rights of approval over the work if you can possibly avoid it. You will probably have to give them the right to approve your co-writers, should you be planning to work with collaborators, or perhaps even some of the other theatrical personnel such as the producer or director. But you should try to avoid at all costs giving them any kind of approval over the script, score, or any ongoing artistic decisions. (Again, the wisest thing to do is not even to bring the subject of approvals up.) I hope this information proves helpful to you, and I wish you the best in your pursuit of this project. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Writing Musicals

Question:

Mr. Schwartz, I was just curious what your process is on starting a new musical project. I've been wanting to write a musical for some time now and can't really get a good plot to work with. I'd love to hear your thoughts. Thank you, Chris

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Hi Chris: Well, that issue about finding a good plot is pretty important, isn't it? I guess the best advice I can give, though it will sound pretty fatuous, is to keep looking. Find a story that interests you, and one where you think the emotions are big enough to give the characters something to sing about. Think about books you have liked (preferably public domain, so you don't have rights issues to deal with.) Historical subjects. Magazine or newspaper articles that seem to suggest a good story. Anything that piques your interest and strikes your fancy. Good luck, Stephen Schwartz

Undertaking a Musical

Question:

Dear Mr. Schwartz, I have been trying to write my own musical for some time now. I have written one full song that people like, but I had to scrape for months to get it done. 7 months for ONE song! I mostly picked up from other people's techniques like Elton John and even a little from yourself. But without any guidance, I'm sort of screwed. Is there any particular scale scheme you like to use? Chromatic? Harmonic? Melodic?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Kevin: Writing a musical is a very long-term and complicated process, since it involves issues of story-telling, character development, dramatic structure, song placement, etc. Perhaps, if you have not already done so, you should just try writing individual songs at this point, so you get your songwriting "chops" developed more. If you want, you could try writing a song for a character in a play you have read or a novel or based on someone you know in life, so you could work on writing for a character other than yourself. Or you could just work on expressing your own thoughts and feelings specifically and honestly. But it sounds as if you need more practice songwriting before you think about undertaking a musical.

As to your question about scale scheme: I don't really think about things like that when I am writing. I just try to have the emotion of the song I am working on dictate the musical choices I make. I think rather than try to model yourself on my writing or Elton John's or whomever's, you should try to follow your instincts in terms of what moves or pleases or excites you musically and see where it takes you. Good luck, Stephen Schwartz

Advice: Workshopping a New Musical

Questions:

We were hoping you would be able to give us some insight into how we might go about a workshop production. Firstly, do you feel more comfortable as the Musical Director or do you prefer to allow someone else to step in while you observe from a distance? Secondly, could you give a few pointers as to how a typical workshop version differs from the final production. eg how long does the process take, what feedback is provided and from whom, are full sets and costumes used, is the rehearsal period the same, etc.

Answers from Stephen Schwartz:

Workshopping means exactly that -- that you are working on your show without concentrating on production values. Therefore, you don't want to be dealing with sets, costumes, lights, etc. I don't know where you are in your development process, but it may be all you need to do is a reading -- just hear the show read and sung by actors, simply sitting at music stands or around a table. That way you can just concentrate on the book and score. For instance, we are about to do our SEVENTH (!) reading of WICKED on Monday. A reading can be put together in a week or so. Or you may be further along with your show and need to work out some preliminary staging ideas, etc., in which case a "workshop", which is essentially a reading with staging, might be a good idea. Those usually take two or three weeks. The point is to keep it as simple as possible, so you can concentrate on the show itself without worrying yet about production values that can obscure or create problems. And yes, I think it's a good idea for the composer NOT to musical direct, if that's at all possible, so he or she can hear the show objectively, without having to worry about performing. In terms of feedback, it's usually a good idea to have a small, friendly audience of people who will understand what you're trying to do and whose taste and opinions you generally respect. In sifting through feedback, the general themes that emerge are usually more useful than specific comments. Hope this is helpful to you; good luck! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Structure and form

Question:

Dear Stephen: I'm beginning to write my musical. It's my first collaboration with a composer, as I want to try the process with a collaborator. We are writing an original piece. It is soooo... h-a-r-d, planning the outline/synopsis. You wrote a long response that was posted in the forum- about structure (and how you and Miss Holzman worked out the structure for wicked, for about a year). It seems that you have (naturally...) a very extended experience in dealing with structure and it's techniques. I know that this

can use (at least) a book, but when you spoke of the usage of story boards and cards/blue prints, story beats I wanted to get better acquainted with these concepts. I'd be very grateful if you could (very shortly, as I know you're busy with Mr. Anderson) specify in a little more detail, these concepts, techniques and process of structuring a musical idea. Thanks loads and loads. Nathaniel

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Nathaniel: You're right, it could use a whole book, and maybe someday I'll actually try to write one. But very briefly, for now:

1. First, get clear on your story. You might want to write, in prose, a kind of outline version of it, so you get the basic order of events clear, figure out the plot, and also be clear what your characters want, what the obstacles are to their achieving their goals, etc. Be sure you and your collaborators agree on the theme and the basic plot, and so on.

2. Then get yourself a large bulletin board and some 3x5 or 4x6 cards.

3. Break your story down into specific scenes and try to write the essence of each scene (or portion of scene) on a card. Try to keep each to one sentence if possible -- e.g. "Bob decides he will have to kill Jeremy" or "Susan seduces Father Aloysius", etc.

4. Put the cards on the board and look at them. See if you have repeated beats -- that is, the same thing happening again in a later scene (e.g. "Bob still wants to kill Jeremy".) If you do, there's something wrong with your structure. Also look for story flow and holes in the story, and make sure each card is active enough in terms of what the characters are trying to do. Believe me, you can spend LOTS of time rearranging cards, cutting scenes and adding events, till you get a story board that really seems tight and consistently forward-moving. But the advantage of doing it like this is that you really get a good overview of your story, and gaps and redundancies become much more obvious.

5. When you're satisfied that you have a pretty solid story structure to start from, try to identify some moments to musicalize. I find it's helpful to identify those moments with a card of a different color, say yellow or blue. That way, you can see if there are too many blue cards clumped together and too many stretches of white cards without a musical moment, etc. In other words, you get a sense of the musical flow of the show too.

So that's a brief precis of this technique. I hope you will find this helpful as you begin to plan the structure of your show. Good luck! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Re-evaluating the I Want song convention

The following is condensed from a long question about "I Want" songs – the song toward the beginning of a show that traditionally allows the protagonist to express his or her central desire.

Previously, Stephen Schwartz has commented:

"I have learned over the years that pretty much any successful musical you can name has an "I Want" song for its main character within the first fifteen or so minutes of the show. I can think of exceptions, but frankly I feel that the lack of such a moment is a weakness in most of those cases."

Question:

Dear Stephen, I was listening to "Just Around The Riverbend," and a very weird and simple question came up: Why? Why did you need to write this song? Intellectually, I know that this song clearly defines what the character of Pocahontas wants and needs and what she is going to pursue throughout the movie. But I don't feel, that besides it being a beautiful song, that it adds very much to the storytelling... because we already know what she wants.

... Must there always be an I want song if the audience already knows what the character wants? ... Sometimes we know what the character wants, without his song. Tony, for instance, already makes the choice of going to the ball, BEFORE he sings Something's Coming. So the choice is made. The song is not about the choice. The song is about making the audience see that he needs something and is looking for it. But we already got that from the monologue Tony delivers to Riff, where he says that he has been dreaming a dream -- where he wakes up, reaching out for something, and that he does not know for what. Then he goes on and sings about the possibilities of what it may be that he wants and that is coming to him. But it remains pretty abstract, until he meets Maria. Why do we need Something Coming?

Do you understand what I mean? If the I Want song is supposed to uncover what it is the character wants and to build that need, then why are there so many I Want songs that are sung AFTER we already know what they want? Is it to stretch the emotional aspect, to further emphasize what the character needs emotionally, beyond the specific thing he believes he needs and wants?... Nathaniel

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Nathaniel: While you are correct that the "I Want" songs in POCAHONTAS and in WEST SIDE STORY don't progress the action or tell us something that we can't find out in dialogue, I ask you to imagine both pieces without the songs. Would we care as much about Tony and Pocahontas? Would we feel as much when they meet Maria and John Smith? It seems to me their longing for change and their openness to it is part of their characters and part of the story, and if it's simply expressed in dialogue, it doesn't feel as emotional. That's the point of doing a musical. For that matter, we know from every line in the first two scenes of FUNNY GIRL that Fanny Brice wants to be a star, so from an informational point-of-view, we don't need to hear "I'm the Greatest Star", but do we really want to see the show without it? I agree that there has to be a balancing act between telling the audience something they already know and heightening the stakes and deepening the emotion in a musical, but making those choices correctly, it seems to me, is part of the craft that separates successful musical theatre writers from those who can't land their stories as effectively. Thanks for an interesting question, Stephen Schwartz

Something Doesn't Fit (April/16/2007 - Monday)

Question:

I'm almost done writing this musical and the songs to it. It's kind of unique in that a traditional musical has a story and a bunch of storyline songs, mine is mostly story driven, but it has one song that's a ballad and I use it near the ending of ACT 1- this one is for the female to sing. Then I use it in the middle of Act 2- the lyrics are changed a little bit and this one is for the male. Lastly, the lyrics are changed again and they both sing the song.

Now that I said all that my question will become clear. I been trying to think of an underscore (if that's the right word) that would fit in the beginning, just a couple of musical notes that you hear immediately when the show starts, just so that in some way it introduces the story and I want to make it a totally different feeling of a ballad than the other ballad because the (I know that rules I won't reveal anything

in specific detail) song is about wanting to meet your desitny (the person your going to marry). Or maybe the way the song is specifically written its like one of those things you don't want to mess up with other songs because it's so beautiful. Help me please, I need to get this done in a month (not for a class) but for something else. I'm sorry this question was long, I just had to explain it well. Any suggestions? cause I'm just confused

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Your ideas sound perfectly workable to me. Obviously, what you're talking about is not a musical, but a play that has a song in it, which could certainly work. And the idea of a song which two characters sing at different times with different lyrics also sounds totally workable. As for an opening musical underscoring moment that sets up the tune -- well, why not? And no necessity for the rhythm or harmony of the tune at the beginning to be identical to the way the song is used in the body of the play; it can just be a sort of thematic motif that the audience hears and gets the melody in their minds. Of course I don't know any of the specifics of either the play or the song, but conceptually I don't see a problem. Good luck with it, Stephen Schwartz

Reply:

Thank-you for telling me my idea wasn't a musical. Actually it really helped me because I was a little bit confused, but now I got it. I've heard that a musical is just a bunch of songs put together into the storyline, and I could write and compose the songs and create the storyline script, no problem, but my next question is how many songs would you need to called your concept idea an official musical, because in all actuality I am trying to create the story to be an official musical, but not too many songs in it. What's a good amount? cause I have no idea.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

In my experience, it doesn't really work that way. It seems to me what you should do is write the show the way you think it will be best to tell the story and get the emotion and ideas across. If that means no songs, one song, or fifty songs, it's really a matter of what will serve your story and your vision the best. I wouldn't worry too much about what to label it. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Finding the balance between serious emotion and comedy?

Question:

Stephen, I've been wondering. How do you find the balance between serious emotion and comedy? I suppose such is the essence of effective drama, but I've noticed that your shows invariably have deep, penetrating themes, lyrics, and concepts - yet interspersed are bits of humor and nonchalance that lighten the mood and offer a change of pace.

I'm now working on a show for which I'm writing my own script, lyrics, and music. With the first act text almost complete, I realize that I have very little emotional break. I pound dramatic theme after dramatic theme with few respites. But would such structure not only leave the audience un-entertained, but perhaps even emotionally desensitized? I suppose this structure is ineffective, simply because it functions separately from the structure of life itself.

In the same vein, I would hate to go off the deep end and sacrifice the cathartic content of the show with unwarranted jests. And my feeble attempts to "inject" more light-heartedness have left me with the realization that some intense rewriting will be necessary.

Accepting this, I'd appreciate any tips - or simply info on how you manage balancing the "main course" of your music and lyrics with the "appetizers, junk food, and dessert".

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

In your question, I think you have put your finger on the answer, when you refer to writing from "the structure of life itself". Life has its comic (and indeed farcical) moments, as well as tragic and serious, and of course, much of what humans do is very funny. The point is not to try to inject comedy for its own sake, stuffed in like an unwanted condiment, but to be open to the comic, sardonic, and ironic sides to your story and characters that arise naturally. This is the kind of thing that writers like Dickens, Hugo, and Austen were able to do so skillfully. It's really an openness on the part of the writer to the comedy inherent in most situations and people. Think about your situations and characters that way, and you may be surprised at what comedy comes organically, without it being forced or imposed. I wish you the best with your project. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Rhythm in lyric writing

Question:

Hi Stephen! I'm having real problems in writing my lyrics. Since the many times I've written you (and you've generously replied), I've gone through many enlightenments. I no longer think I can compose music without having any kind of musical education, even though I am self taught (though not well enough). Now that I am focusing on the writing- I have reached a point where I simply can't write lyrics. I suddenly found out a startling fact- although I've been writing poetry for years, I cannot write lyrics well enough, for lack of rhythm. I used to think that rhythm is technically matching the amount of syllables. Loh and behold! It is not so! I am trying to understand if you make up a rhythm in your head and fill it out with lyrics, or the other way around. I can't really afford the money that have to be invested in a musical education. I'd appreciate if you could please once again enlighten me with your advice. How can I acquire a sense of rhythm (I don't think i really lack a sense of rhythm- just have to learn a technique to tame the darn thing!) Thanks loads and loads. Nathaniel

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Nathaniel: This is really a variation on the familiar question: "Which comes first, the music or the lyrics?". The answer is that either process will work, depending on which you prefer. Often it varies from song to song. I have two suggestions for you. The first, which is the obvious one, is that you look for a lyricist to collaborate with. Many composers who start out to write their own lyrics ultimately decide that this is not their forte and find a collaborator. The second suggestion, which is a way to practice developing your technique, is to find music to some songs whose words you are not familiar with, and try writing your own lyrics to the tunes. Then compare your lyrics to the actual lyrics of the songs, and see how they compare rhythmically, what you can learn from the original lyrics, and where you may actually prefer what you have done! I think that kind of practice may prove helpful to you. Best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

Question:

Do you feel a rhythm immediately when you start writing?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I kind of do. I have a pretty strong rhythmic sense, and in songs or portions of songs where the lyric is leading the music, I still have a pretty good idea what the rhythm of the song is going to be when I write the music. That's what makes writing lyrics for other composers fun for me; they so often surprise me with rhythmic choices that are different from mine, where in my head the rhythm seemed inevitable.

I'm not exactly sure why you're finding the rhythmic sense of your lyrics challenging. After all, poems that aren't meant to be sung tend to have a pretty clear rhythm (unless they're contemporary blank verse.) I would just recommend being more aware of the overall structure of a verse or section, rather than focusing on each individual word or line. I don't know if that's a helpful suggestion, but it's what occurred to me. Good luck! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Songwriting – Concentrating on idea...

Question:

How can I stay concentrated in the idea and meaning of what I want to say, with having to deal with rhyme and rhythm?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately), that is the exact challenge of being a good lyricist. One has to be able to concentrate on both form (that is rhyme and rhythm) AND content. The ability to do that comes with experience and practice, and as you are discovering, it is not easy. The best lyricists make it look easy (just as Barishnikov makes doing an incredible jete and then landing perfectly look effortless), but that apparent effortlessness is what talent and craft is all about.

Q and A

Question:

What do you think helps you most as a lyricist / what helped you to become a better lyricist in your journey through writing lyrics?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Without going into a long dissertation on writing lyrics (and if you're interested, there is a very good one by Stephen Sondheim that I think is contained in the appendix to *SONDHEIM AND COMPANY*), a few tips: Make sure you are clear about what you are trying to say; this may involve writing out your ideas in prose first or free-associating and sketching little pieces of ideas, before you try to write the song itself. A good title helps -- I like to start with a title, because it helps to focus my thinking about a song. Know where you are heading in each verse and in the song in general; to some extent, I think lyrics "write backward", in that often I know what the last line of a verse or song is going to be and the trick is getting to it in a way that doesn't seem forced or predictable.

Question:

What do you think helps you most as a composer / what helped you to become a better lyricist in your journey through composing music?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think the most important thing about writing music is that it please and/or move you -- that you write what sounds good to your ear. Chances are if you do that, others will respond too. Also, I think music for a show needs to represent the world of that show and the character who is singing it, so that it tells you about both even if you couldn't hear the lyrics.

Question:

Is it as hard as they say to get a name as a writer for the musical theater?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Yes. I think it's increasingly tough to get started, because musicals are so expensive and producers increasingly disinclined to take risks. But all you can do is try to write a good show, and hope it will prove of interest to a producer. Good luck! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 3 COMPOSING

Music or Lyrics?/Orchestra Size

Question:

I am a sophomore and an aspiring composer. I am preparing to write a musical which I can include in my application portfolio to Carnegie-Mellon University next year. I was just wondering if, as an expert, you had time to answer a few questions about the process. First of all, I am used to writing either for lyricists who already have lyrics in mind, or ones who, giving me the thematic idea, prefer to fill in lyrics for melodies I generate. However, I have never tried writing both my own libretto and music. Do you generally write one before the other, and mold the other one to what you have written? How would you suggest I go about this?

Secondly, I am unsure of what range of instruments I may and should utilize for orchestral purposes. Should I use what my Finale 2005 software considers "full orchestra"? Our school shows generally have limited pit orchestras, and there is a (very) slim chance I may be able to have them produce one or more of the songs live-which is preferable to college admissions-in which case it may be beneficial to limit the quantity and variety of instruments used. On top of this, I'm not even sure what professional shows have in their orchestras. What do you suggest? Thank you for your advice!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Different composer/lyricists work differently in terms of the famous "which comes first, the music or the lyrics?" question. My friend John Bucchino, for instance, tends to write lyrics first, I know others who generally write music first, and I follow the path of least resistance, starting with whichever I find easier. I do like to start with a title, though, and I recommend that to you, as it helps to focus your ideas and define for you what the song is about. Of course, if by the term "libretto" you mean the book of the musical as well as the lyrics, I strongly recommend you have much of it completed before you write any of the songs. At the very least, you should have a very well thought-through outline before attempting any songs.

In terms of orchestra size, that too is up to the composer, and depends a lot on the style of the music. *GODSPELL*, being a rock score, was originally done with four musicians, and today is usually done with five. On the other hand, the Broadway production of *WICKED* has an orchestra of 23. Just for practical purposes, you should know that even the largest Broadway orchestras these days are rarely larger than 18 musicians, the new minimum number required by the musicians' union. In the particular instance you describe, however, it seems to me that since you would like to have one or more of the numbers performed by your school orchestra, you should orchestrate for them to make that possibility more likely.

I hope these answers have proven helpful, and I wish you the best with your project. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Advice on writing a song

Question missing

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

What I might suggest, as a way to start, is to think of something you might want to write about -- a person, an experience, an event, an idea, a place, a feeling at a particular time, etc. Then see what that triggers -- do some words come to mind? Does it suggest a melody? A rhythmic feeling or certain chords? Start from there -- you shouldn't expect to have a complete lyric or all the music right away. Maybe just some phrases or a verse or whatever. Keep following your instincts until you feel you have a finished piece that musically and lyrically expresses what you wanted to write about. And voila -- you will have a song! And if you enjoy doing that and are happy with the result, you can start the process again on another one! I hope this suggestion is helpful to you, and that you wind up fulfilling your dream with at least one song that you have written. Best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

Composition: Melodies

Question:

I write music, and a lot of it ends up sounding like a techno-goth-crazy-dance-film score. A lot of my stuff doesn't have a set melody, and I'd like to be able to figure out how to set one, because I'd like to shift my style into Musical Theatre. Should I write a melody first, or a bass line, or what? I usually start w/ bass & drums then layer on different instruments...is that my problem?

Answers from Stephen Schwartz:

If you are concerned about the strength of your melodies, try focusing on them more. Try making sure that the rise and fall and the ebb and flow of the melody really match the emotional content of the lyrics, word by word and line by line. Sing your melody to yourself without the rhythm track and see where you can make it more soaring or more interesting. And starting composing from the melody or from chords rather than from a rhythm track may also help pull you out of a techno-pop groove. Good luck and keep writing, Stephen Schwartz

Advice on Composition/Setting a Poem to Music

Question:

I posted a question a couple of months ago about myself having problems coming up with a solid "melody" when I write music, my previous problem was that I would come up w/ the rhythm/percussion section first so the ultimate result would be a techno-funk type of thing. Well, I've gotten away from percussion and have been concentrating on just piano, now my problem is I have some pretty good accompaniment, but nothing to forward it! I don't know if I should find some lyrics somewhere & work off of that or if I should just keep playing w/ a melody over the accompaniment. Frustrated Zack

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Zack: Yes, I think working from a lyric is a good idea, as it will give you a sense of form and emotional content. Even if the lyric is later replaced by another lyric, I think you might find it helpful. Also, setting a poem might be helpful, if you don't have a lyric you like that's handy. Don't feel constrained by the structure of the poem; it's amazing how you can depart without undercutting the basic intention. Much of the score for GODSPELL was written that way, with me re-setting existing Episcopal hymns. Good luck -- let me know how it works for you. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Gee, this sounds familiar

Question:

Dear Stephen, Over the past year or so I've taken up song writing as a hobby. I have written six songs thus far and have discovered just how difficult a task it is to write a good song. While I have some serious challenges writing a satisfying lyric - one free of clichés etc. - I'll save those questions for a

future post. My questions today concerns the musical side of things: I've discovered with the last couple of songs I've written, that they sound a bit too much like everything else I've written previously, both melodically and in the accompaniment figure. I'm sure part of the problem is that I write at the piano and my fingers naturally fall to places that are most familiar. The other issue may be my own limited theory training. Here are my questions:

1. How does one begin to find different kinds of musical voices and expand their musical vocabulary in order to write in diverse styles?
2. Do you think it helps to write away from the piano?
3. How valuable is additional music theory in expanding one's musical vocabulary?
4. Have you ever faced the challenge of writing a song and during the process or even after it's complete, discovering that it's sounds a bit too much like another piece you've written? I think it was Martin Mull who said, "Talking about music is like dancing about architecture" but I'd appreciate any insight you might have to offer. Best, Shawn McCarthy

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Hey Shawn: Good for you that you're writing, and be assured that all of us songwriters face the same issue. (I just had to re-write the melody to one of the songs from WICKED because it was too much like something from BAKER'S WIFE, and the other day, after a reading of my children's show CAPTAIN LOUIE, someone pointed out to me that the end of one of the songs was identical to the end of "Meadowlark" with different chords.) In answer to your question as to how to expand your vocabulary: One of the things I would do is listen to other kinds of music, particularly kinds (or singers and writers) you don't normally listen to, and see if anything there lands in your unconscious. Also, try playing things by composers you don't normally play on the piano, to expand your fingers' muscle memory (I did that with Debussy and other French composers prior to writing the score for BAKER'S WIFE.) Simpler but also effective methods are writing in different keys than you normally might, and looking for a different rhythm or metric pattern.

Writing away from the piano is a way to go -- I've read that Stephen Sondheim does that, and I observed that Leonard Bernstein did. I don't tend to do it much, as I find writing a more viscerally emotional experience when my hands are on the keyboard, but I have done it from time to time. It's not my personally favorite method.

Additional music theory can never hurt, I suppose, as long as it doesn't cause your writing to start to become academic. But I think it's useful to the extent it opens your mind and ears to new sounds, styles, and techniques.

I know this response is pretty general, but I hope you find it useful. Best, Stephen Schwartz

Composing Questions

Question:

Hello, Mr. Schwartz, I have a few questions concerning composing music that I'm hoping you'll be able to (and willing to) answer for me. I'm in the process of writing a musical, but it's coming along very slowly. I truly don't know what to do first when approaching a song. May I ask what your process is when composing a musical? I'm never sure if I should start with lyrics, and then form the melody and

accompaniment from that, or if I should start with accompaniment and build the lyrics and melody around the accompaniment. Probably because I've been playing piano for 13 years, I'm much better at writing accompaniment than I am coming up with lyrics. So as a result, I have many pieces that are just accompaniment and I'm feeling trapped to find lyrics that fit the meters of the measures. I feel as though I'm stuck in a rut because I play my pieces for my friends and their responses are always just "it's good. I like it." And that doesn't really give me a whole lot to go on. I apologize if this e-mail is in anyway a waste of your time. I'm sure that you are a very busy man. I'm asking your advice because you are one of my two favorite composers. I am very inspired by your work, especially pieces like "West End Avenue" and "Meadowlark" with the wonderfully moving and challenging piano arrangements. Playing your work on the piano always makes me want to compose afterwards, so I thought it appropriate to ask for your advice in this matter. One more question: Do you hand write your music? Or do you find it easier to use a computer program? Thanks so much for your time, Mr. Schwartz. I hope this isn't a bother.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for the message and your enthusiasm for my work. Many people often ask whether music or lyrics come first in writing a song, but if I'm doing both words and music, the answer is that I take the path of least resistance. That can mean either music first, or part of a lyric, or as you describe, an accompaniment figure. In almost every case, though, I like to start with a title -- not always, but usually -- because it helps to define the landing place of the lyric and the feel of the music. But if you're feeling trapped by your accompaniment figures, maybe it's time to try shaking things up by starting with at least part of the lyric. (When I write just lyrics, though, in collaboration with someone like Alan Menken, we always work music first -- I find it makes for a more natural marriage of words and music -- though again, we will usually have a title and often I'll give Alan a few lines of lyric to get him started. I know what you mean about the difficulty of trying to find lyrics to fit the existing meters, but although it takes time, I do like working this way when I'm collaborating.)

I used to have to write music out by hand, of course, before the advent of computers, and sometimes I still do. But I love being able simply to sit at a keyboard and play the piano accompaniment -- even with the necessity of then separating the left and right hands and doing some editing and cutting and pasting, it still saves me hours of time. So these days, I usually play songs into the computer and print them out, rather than writing them out. Hope these answers prove helpful. Stephen Schwartz

Advice on writer's block while composing

Question:

I have come to a stage where I am beginning to think my music is sounding all the same; my fingers are falling on all the same chords and I get the impression I am just not putting enough variety into my music and no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to break out of this feeling. Is there any advice you can offer me to break away from this? Stephen Sondheim said it's best not to write at the piano because then we fall into the same traps...and I can't help agreeing with this at the moment. Maybe it's writer's block or maybe it is getting to me too much.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I have another suggestion for you besides writing away from the piano (something that never really works for me.) Have you tried playing other music on the piano? Try answering these questions: What is the style of your show? Is it set in a particular place and time, or is it pop, or more Broadway or classically oriented, etc.? Who are other composers whose work might be appropriate for the setting and style? Then get some music by those composers, particularly ones whose work you are not terribly

familiar with or which is significantly different from your own. And rather than writing anything for a while, spend a couple of weeks or a month just playing that other music. Get some of those harmonic progressions and rhythmic pulses in your finger-tips. Then, without trying to imitate these other writers in any way, go back to your own work, and see if your fingers and brain don't take you to other places you wouldn't have automatically gone to before.

This is precisely what I did before writing THE BAKER'S WIFE. I spent a month or so simply playing Debussy, Satie, and Ravel on the piano, along with French folk tunes and playing by ear songs I liked from old French music hall albums. Then when I went to write the score, I didn't try to imitate them consciously or use any of them specifically, but they informed what I wrote sort of through osmosis. I suggest you try something like that and see if it works for you. Worth a try, anyway. Good luck!
Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Songwriting help...?

Question:

Dear Mr. Schwartz, How do you write such great songs? I've been a fan of yours for a long time, and I've been writing songs for even longer. I still can never get my lyrics and music to completely click, but it sounds like you can do it with ease. How do you get the music and the lyrics to fit so perfectly together? I admire your work greatly, and I also wonder where you get such great ideas. Whenever I write songs, I like them at first. But then I go back a week or two later, and I think "This is such a dumb song!" I realize that the idea wasn't a good one, and throw the song away. I wonder how you have so many good ideas.

Also, I was a member of the cast of "Working" back in high school. (I played Delores Dante, the waitress.) I had a lot of fun, and I still have the CD, which I listen to from time to time. When I first heard the songs, I remember thinking, "Wow! I wish I could write songs like that!" I plan to see "Wicked" with my children soon, and judging from your other works, I have high expectations. I hope this show will be as good as all the others you've worked on. I know it will be.~Lisa Rosebury

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Ms. Rosebury: Thank you for the compliments and your enthusiasm for my work. In answer to your question, though, first of all, I don't in fact find it easy, particularly lyrics, which take me a long time and I find quite challenging. If it winds up looking as if I do it with ease, that's great, since that of course is the goal with all art. But I find lyrics take a lot of cogitation time and then a lot of polishing and reworking, etc.

As to your own work, I suspect you may be being too hard on yourself. I think all writers have that delayed reaction you describe -- where we write something we're really pleased with (partly I suppose out of relief at simply having finished it), and then on second thought it starts to seem really stupid. But then a more realistic assessment sets in. So don't be too quick to give in to that second phase voice, the one of the harshest critic in the world that lives inside your head. Thanks again for your complimentary words, Stephen Schwartz

Contrapuntal Writing

Question:

This year, we are studying contrapuntal writing - what I think is a great effect in Opera and Theatre writing. You use it heavily in the prologue for Godspell as well as in "It's all for the best" and in two songs in "Wicked" to my knowledge. I have written it before - but sometimes it works better than others. Do

you work it out harmonically contrasting each note, or does it sometimes come as luck? It's something I would like to get better at. Any tips?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The main advice I would offer is to build off the chord progression. So when you have a first melody you like, simply write the next one or ones to fit the same chord progression. Obviously, it's often helpful if there is rhythmic variety between (or among) the melodies -- that is, a slow ballady melodic line contrasted with a faster, bouncier melody. (However it's not essential -- Sondheim in FOLLIES put three up-tempo tunes together -- "Rain on the Roof", "Ah, Paris", and "Broadway Baby" -- and it worked just fine.) Once you have found your additional melodies based on the same harmonic structure, you can check the individual notes against one another to make sure the lines are not on the same notes at the same time too often, and make adjustments as necessary. Finally, when presenting the melodies for the first time, you can change some of the harmony underneath to further fool the listener, so when they all go together it is even more of a surprise. Hope you find these suggestions helpful.

Harmony

Question:

So there was this film composer here at Interlochen yesterday. He did a masterclass with the composers and I played him two musical theatre pieces. He thought I needed to expand my harmony. Even though there were a lot more than two chords in the piece, he thought I should expand and modulate. My private teacher agrees. Did this ever happen to you? If so, how did you fix it? Mr. McNeely said I should sit down and transcribe some Sondheim and Guettel. What do you think I should do?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think the key question is whether you like Sondheim and Guettel's music, whether you respond to it emotionally. Does it move you, excite you, and if so, what specific songs or moments in songs? If so, I think studying it, whether by transcription or careful listening and playing of it, could be beneficial, because it will get into your brain and your fingers. If not, move on to something else.

Why do I say this? Because I think all composers' styles are based on a patchwork of influences of music they have heard that particularly excited or moved them. It's obvious from listening to Sondheim for instance that he has (or had as he was developing) a great affinity for Ravel, from listening to Bernstein how much he was influenced by Copland, etc. I know that for me, my sense of melody, harmonization, structure, rhythm, etc. was in large measure formed by my response to music that I loved and continue to love. This is not to say one shouldn't try to stretch oneself by trying to expand one's tastes. But for instance, having listened to a lot of twelve-tone music, I'm never going to like it, so there's no point in my studying it in order to try to incorporate it into my own style. I guess what I'm saying is that transcribing and/or studying music that pushes your boundaries is a good thing, but I wouldn't be imitating things you don't really like. That's my opinion anyway, for whatever it's worth. Good luck and happy listening! Stephen Schwartz

Melody vs. Chord Progressions

Question:

Mr. Schwartz, A friend of mine was looking over some music that I wrote. He said that if I wanted to make it better, I should concentrate on finding a chord progression that I liked first, then adding a melody, because that would strengthen its functional tonality. I haven't had the opportunity to study music in depth yet (I'm still in high school), but I thought this seemed a bit backwards. Anyway, I was wondering what you thought about it.

Do you find that, when writing a piece, it is best to stay strictly melodic at the start, or do the melody and harmony kind of converge naturally? Or do you begin with a clear idea of the piece's harmonic progression? Thank you for your time, and I really admire your scores.-Eric

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Eric: I don't have one set way of approaching a song, though for the most part I do find that melody and harmony tend to converge naturally. But sometimes a harmonic progression can be the starting point for a song before I have a melody (this was true of "Stranger to the Rain" from CHILDREN OF EDEN for example, one of my favorites of my songs). And often as I'm noodling around at the piano and singing the melody of a new song over and over, I'll change the harmonization to something more interesting (to me) than my first instinct. The point is, there are no fixed rules. If you want to experiment by beginning with a chord progression and putting a melody over it, by all means do so; it may lead you to write something you otherwise wouldn't have. I'm all for anything that stretches you and broadens your range. Good luck with your composing, thanks for writing, and best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

Unlocking the problem of keys...

Question:

Do you think the key a piece is in has a different timbral and tonal effect? I know certain composers like one key over another. Chris DeBurgh likes Bb Major - and Cole Porter seemed obsessed with Eb Major. TO me - playing "For Good" in Db major sounds different to C major - it seems richer and fuller. I know you originally wrote it in Db and then made it into C major for the P & V music (presumably so it doesn't have 5 flats getting in the way). I guess what I am leading to is what goes in on one's mind when choosing a key for a song? Do you need to go as far as to think "okay - so this song is in a key that uses lots of flats, which some instruments don't like, so I'd better change" - or do you just write in whatever key safe in the knowledge that it will be changed later on? Nick

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I do think keys have very significant differences in feel. As you point out, I write a lot in the key of Db major; this is because I think Db is the richest on an acoustic piano. There's something about the way the overtones vibrate with one another; if I'm ever trying out a piano or contemplating purchasing one, I always test it by playing the beginning of "Lion Tamer" in Db (the key in which it was originally written). I agree that C major is a more pallid, blander sounding key. To me, sharp keys such as E major and A major are brilliant and brittle, flat keys such as Eb or Ab more tender and warmer. So I do think about and respond to key when I'm writing. That being said, because I'm writing for singers, I know that songs will often have to be transposed, and I will just have to live with the keys they wind up in. I do try to have things transposed into a key that has a similar feel to me; for instance, "Meadowlark" was originally written in E major, but when transposed for a female singer, it was put into A major, which to me feels closely aligned. All this of course may be simply my imagination or my own idiosyncratic response, but there it is since you ask. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Ranges/Playoffs/Reductions

Question:

How do I know what key to initially write in, if it's a duet or chorus piece?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It depends on the voices. Obviously, the range for women is different than the range for men, and for sopranos it's different than beltors, etc. When in doubt, my recommendation would be to write in whatever key you're comfortable with and then assume the musical director will be transposing for the actors.

Question:

When do I need to write a playoff, and how long should they be? How do I decide at what point in the dialogue to cue in an intro to a song? How much audience recovery time is needed after a sad song, and do I write a longer playoff for that, or leave silence?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The answer to all three of these questions is: it depends. I think you should follow your instincts, again with the expectation that adjustments will be made in rehearsal and, if you have any, previews.

Question:

Is it necessary to have the melody included in the piano part of the piano reduction?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

No. That's the way easier vocal selections are published. In the case of WICKED, two versions were published -- one reflecting the actual piano part, and one which included the melody in the right hand of the piano for those who wanted it that way. But in terms of writing for the show itself, no, you needn't have the melody in the accompaniment unless you want it there.

Question:

For most community theaters, is writing for piano, bass, drums enough, or do I need a horn or violin?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Again, it depends. Many community theatre productions are done with just a piano or two keyboards. Of course having bass and drums helps fill out the sound. If it's a pop score, a pop band will probably suffice, which means in addition to keyboard, bass, and drums, you may want a guitar. For a more "legit" score, you may be fine with just piano, or you may feel you need to have a few other instruments for additional orchestral colors, such as the horn or violin you mention; woodwinds are often the most useful. These days a lot of effective musical textures can be gotten from a synth, of course. There's really no set rule, as you can see; it really depends on what you want. Again, the musical director may have some ideas that appeal to you.

Perfect Pitch

Question:

How do you feel having perfect pitch helps you as a composer? How do you decide on a key to write a piece in?-Danny

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I don't know that whether or not one has perfect pitch really helps one as a composer. It's sort of like a parlor trick in a way -- impressive to observers sometimes, but not really all that important. The only place I've really found it to come in handy is listening to auditions, where I know what the high note someone has hit is without having to ask.

As to choosing the key for a song, obviously some of that decision is based on what kind of voice is going to sing it (tenor, soprano, belter, etc.) and therefore what the range should be. But a lot of it is just based on feel for me. I feel different keys conjure different emotional responses, though when I've read essays where other composers describe -- often with great conviction and authority -- what keys have what connotations, I find I usually completely disagree with them. In other words, it's personal. (I particularly like the key of Db major, which I find the most beautiful and resonant on an acoustic piano.) Thanks for the interesting question, Stephen Schwartz

Comment from a Forum visitor:

That's interesting that you would say that, Stephen, because I know that D-flat is also Andrew Lloyd Webber's favorite key (most resonant and all that). It's interesting knowing that to look at a lot of his music that is in that key (All I Ask of You, Don't Cry For Me Argentina, Music of the Night, etc.) So I guess composers sometimes agree . . . Caleb

Key of Db Major/D-flat

Question:

I have to mention I love Mr. Schwartz's use of keys. My favorite key has always been D-flat. After looking through a lot of his music, some of the more passionate songs are written in that key. I was wondering if it had any significance, other than being a key that really sounded good, or fit a voice.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It is my favorite key on the piano. I just feel it resonates best. I was very disappointed, for instance, when "Lion Tamer" had to be transposed from Db to C for the singer on Broadway -- I much prefer it in Db. I find it interesting that you feel the same, as I have not encountered that many pianists who share my love for Db major. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Comment from a Forum visitor:

D-flat major is also one of my favourite keys, especially in ballads and soliloquies. It has this rich and dark, yet somewhat unnervingly positive feel to it. I feel the thing about black keys is that they are more mellow, while their white ones are much brighter... sometimes a little too bright!

Writing music

Question:

hey Stephen. I have recently gotten into writing music, my question is: when writing music how do you figure out how to put in the right chords or whatnot in the left hand part?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I'm not exactly sure if you're asking about naming the chords (for purposes of someone reading the music) or composing them. Since I compose almost always at the piano, the chords emerge as part of that process. In terms of naming them (e.g. Cmaj7, Ebm7b5, etc.), that's something I learned how to do at Juilliard, though I had to re-learn some standard sheet music parlance (for instance, at Juilliard, we would have called an Ebm7b5 chord and Eb 1/2 diminished 7th). Hope that answers your question, whichever way it was intended. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

How often do you work on a piece?

Question:

How often do you consistently work on a musical? I find that working every day on a piece helps to strengthen it as well as taking time off and coming back to a piece. Is that a bit too much? Some people think I'm obsessive.

Also, do you have "guniea pigs" (certain people lol) you use every so often to read a scene with or rehearse the entrance into a song with or rehearse a song with before you actually go into rehearsal. I often do that but I'm rather perplexed on if I should classify that as a reading or workshop of sorts. Is that a great way to do a budget workshop or reading, and do you think its efficient? What are your thoughts on the matter? Sincerely, Olivia Lilley

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Olivia: Like you, I find it necessary to work consistently. I need what I call "days in a row". I think that way one's unconscious mind, where one's best work is going to be done, gets engaged and is constantly thinking about solutions and inspirations. I tend to go into "writer hibernation", and take several days or weeks in a row during which I work for a period of time every day. This can be in order to get a specific song done, or a section of a show, etc. I wouldn't be able to write an entire score without breaks, but I also can't write effectively if I have constant breaks and distractions.

[next question - Also, do you have "guinea pigs" (**certain people lol**) you use every so often to read a scene with or rehearse the entrance into a song with or rehearse a song with before you actually go into rehearsal.]

I often do that but I'm rather perplexed on if I should classify that as a reading or workshop of sorts. Is that a great way to do a budget workshop or reading, and do you think its efficient? What are your thoughts on the matter?]

I think it is always helpful to hear your material; in fact, I would say it's vital. I always do a lot of readings, which increase in "formality" as a project progresses. Very often at the beginning of a project, I just ask a group of friends to get together and read it, and sometimes, I ask some other friends, whose taste and honesty I trust, to listen and give me their reactions. In the early going, I wouldn't consider them "formal" readings, with Equity rules and all that, but I always pay the participants a little something for their time and to cover transportation and meal costs, etc. I don't have a set group of actors or singers I work with, but if you have people who are willing to get together and learn something so you can hear it sung or read, that's enormously valuable. I hope these responses help at least partially to answer your questions. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 4 – GETTING PRODUCED AND LICENSED

Getting shows produced

Question missing

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

As to your question -- how to get a production of a show -- it's hard to answer without my knowing where you are located and also what stage of development the show is in (is it finished? is there a script? do you have a demo of the score? etc.) Maybe there is a regional theatre near you that has a reading series for new plays and musicals, or a college with a musical theatre department that might do a reading, etc. In NYC, there are festivals for new musicals that Broadway producers and agents attend (or send representatives to check out). You want to get the show seen and/or heard by people, in other

words, to see if any interest in presenting it develops. Plus you will learn about the show and what needs to be strengthened about it. I know this answer is kind of vague, but I hope some of it is helpful.

Question for Mr. Schwartz [about getting produced]

Question:

Mr. Schwartz, I've co-written three rock operas, and trying to get them staged. Every production company we've talked to has turned us down, because of the following reasons (these are quotes): "If you're not ALW, Stephen Sondheim, Bernstein or Schwartz, nobody will give a damn!" "You're local? HA! Good luck!" "We only do known material." "A new musical? We only do the hits. When you make it to Broadway, we'll talk." My question is: how did Rice/Lloyd Webber, Sondheim, Schwartz, etc. get their work onstage. They HAD to start somewhere, by getting people to take a risk, right? AAAAAAARGH!! The one good thing is, two companies and a high school have said "maybe for 2007." So, where do we go from here? We're only asking for a leap of faith! Thank you in advance, Andy.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Andy: It seems to me you've answered your own question. You say in your message that "two companies and a high school have said 'maybe'". If you succeed in getting one of these smaller productions, and the show works, it is likely to lead somewhere. That's pretty much how everyone gets his start. I don't know who the producers are you have been rejected by, but it sounds to me as if you may have been trying to go too commercially big too soon. Here in New York, for instance, there are all sorts of festivals, workshops, showcases, and readings in which new writers show their talents and their wares. And the process seems to work, as one can see by how many new writers are beginning to be represented on Broadway. The paradoxical truth is that simultaneously A) everyone is looking for the next big thing, and B) no one wants to [hear] from anyone new. The trick is to get from A) to B), and it sounds as if you are in the process of doing that. Good luck to you, Stephen Schwartz

My New Musical

Dear Mr. Schwartz, I am a 13 year old composer from Illinois. I am writing a new show, called ILLUSIONS, based on the life of Harry Houdini. Some musical numbers include "The Art of Illusion" "One More Step" "A Taller Building" "Spectacular Spectacle" "I Still Love" "Somehow" "Any Brain is the Key"... I am doing the book, music and lyrics for the show. I would like to ask you for advice on it. The advice I would like is, how do you write such beautiful scores? And, how do I get the show performed when I'm only 13? Thanks...For other people- Tell me what you think of the idea. Thanks again-Ryan

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Ryan: Have you tried approaching the music or theatre department in your school about doing a performance? Or if you are not yet in high school, you might talk to someone in the music/theatre department of the high school you will be attending. That's something I did when I was in high school. Or if there is a local community theatre in your town, you might try approaching them (perhaps one of your parents could help with that.) I applaud your ambition, and I wish you the best with your first show! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Publishing Musicals

Question:

Hey there! I am currently a student at Berklee College of Music and am taking a publishing class. I am very interested in the business side of musical theater and for my final project I am trying to find information on publishing and licensing musicals. I have licensing information from Music Theater

International but have not been able to find specifics on the process of publishing a musical. Do you have any advice on who to contact? Is there a specific publisher you use? Just curious. Thanks - Erika

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Erika: I'm sorry, but I don't think I'm able to be of much help to you. I don't specifically make deals for publication of my musicals. They are handled for licensing by MTI, with the exception of RAGS, which is handled by Rodgers & Hammerstein. Of course, the music gets published -- in the case of WICKED, for instance, the print rights were granted to Hal Leonard (who is doing a great job with it, by the way.) But in terms of specifically "publishing" a musical, as in putting out a book form version of it, I don't have sufficient experience to give you a useful answer. Sorry. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 5 – Income and Copyright

Profit-Splitting/Royalties

Question:

If you are allowed to say, how are profits on a show split up these days? Only I read an interview recently about how, when WEST SIDE STORY came out, profits were split with the book writer, composer, and lyricist each earning 2% of the gross.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

You may be thinking of royalties, which are different than profits. In the past (back when WEST SIDE STORY was originally produced), the Dramatists Guild contract called for each "element" of the writing team -- that is book, music, and lyrics -- to receive a minimum of 2% of the gross box office receipts every week. Unless a writer had it in his contract, there was no profit-sharing; all the profits went to the producer and investors. (There were of course other payments to the writers, most notably participation and eventual ownership of subsidiary rights, which would include payments for movie sales and performances in regional theatres, summer stock, community theatre, college theatre, etc.)

Needless to say, with a show like WEST SIDE STORY, this amounts to far greater income than the royalties from Broadway.)

Nowadays, the deals are more complicated, and more often than not, the writers find themselves in a "royalty pool", in which all the royalty participants (this would include the director, choreographer, designers, etc.) receive a divided up percentage of the "operating profits" each week. This was designed to help investors recover their money faster and to protect shows in losing weeks so that they could run longer. Theoretically, it means that if a show is struggling, the writers get less than they would have under a straight royalty arrangement, but that if it is a gigantic hit, they get more. In practice, it doesn't tend to work out that way, and as you may imagine, this sort of system is very open to abuse and chicanery, so the Dramatists Guild is not thrilled with it (neither, frankly, are the producers, so it is being reexamined.)

For a greater understanding of how the economics of Broadway and the professional theatre work as they pertain to writers, check out the Dramatists Guild website; there should be information and publications available that can explain this in far more depth and clarity than the above.

Composer Salary Info

Question:

I am a media music composition major and aspire to write for the stage and screen as successfully as Stephen Schwartz has. So my question is this: can you give me a bit of information on salary for such a

position? After Mr. Schwartz had completed his schooling, what was the range of what he charged for his composing? How has that changed now that he is so well-renowned? Is there anything that you might suggest as far as financial planning is concerned for a young musician?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It's different for stage and screen. Stage is generally an advance and then a royalty, and one can find out minimums by checking with the Dramatists Guild. (My first job, "Butterflies Are Free", I got \$25 a wk!) For film, it's generally work-for-hire and one gets paid per song, and by the time I was doing that, my fee was in the five-figure range per song. Of course there are additional sources of income -- mechanical royalties from recordings, ASCAP, etc. Hope this is helpful.

Copyrighting/Marketing Songs

Question:

I have written a few songs that i am interested in getting copyrighted and then heard by people who can facilitate them being picked up by certain artists and recorded. I am not a green eyed kid, have a family and responsible job for more than 20 years but those who have heard the songs think they are worthy of my pursuing this further. Any suggestions on how to proceed and make the appropriate contacts would be greatly appreciated.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

My best suggestion is for you to get hold of Jimmy Webb's book Tunesmith: Inside the Art of Songwriting, which has useful info about marketing songs. Copyrighting is easy -- you just get a form from the Library of Congress and send it back with a copy of the song and a check for, I think, six dollars.
Stephen Schwartz

SCHWARTZ on Copyright.

Question not available

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

There's a difference between not being able to copyright a title (several completely different songs have the same title, for instance) and copyrighting the content of the song itself. If it is true that a song on a show is identical to one of your copyrighted songs, you may have grounds for legal action, IF you can demonstrate conclusively that the writers of the song had access to your material.

That being said, I think it's extremely unlikely that someone deliberately stole your material. I have been on the other side of suits brought by people who claimed I had heard their songs and appropriated their material, and none of them ever had the slightest basis in fact (nor were ever successful.) If you can't prove that these other writers heard your song before writing theirs, then the similarity is a coincidence and you should let it go.

The Great Evil God, Commercialism

Question:

I already knew you placed the artistic value of your work ahead of the friendship of your stockbroker, that much is evident throughout your career, my question was related to the intense frustration I feel as a classically trained 'art' composer, who was raised to see Music Theatre as a poor relation alternative, employing second rate writers who were only there for the money. I love Music Theatre, and the more I work in the genre, the more offensive this attitude seems. I could not approach most of my former tutors about my current output if I tried, as they would consider my work beneath them. Kern, Porter,

Rodgers, Sondheim, all seem unable to root out the 'fast buck' mentality that exists throughout so much of the music world over Music Theatre. Is this simply pettiness, after all, there is a possibility of earning six figure sums from shows, and I never yet met a rich art composer (Quote Stravinsky to Gershwin, 'Young man, perhaps it is you who should be teaching me'), or do you think there is some other strange reason for this? Every 'writer' I have met who considers Music Theatre to be a quick cash cow is either hopelessly misguided, inept, or deluded, but there are SO many people out there who view the musical as a ticket to a fortune. How do you appease the production team dreaming of a six month advance box office cushion at the same time as appeasing your innate sense of musicality, drama and artistic integrity? It's driving me insane, not least of all because I need to sell something to be able to write more, therefore better!!!!!! Any thoughts? (or possibly this comes over as the deranged ramblings of a lunatic!) Many thanks, Paul Kessell-Holland (collaborator with Nick Scrivens on House in the Country)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Mr. Kessell-Holland: I think writers write what they would like to hear and the kind of music that moves and interests them. I can't say commercial considerations don't come into it for any of them -- I'm sure there are people who become songwriters or composers because they think it will make their fortune, particularly in the pop world. But certainly in the classical and musical theatre world, as well as with the good pop writers, the motivation is love of the music itself. So I don't think writers should worry about what is or isn't a first-rate or second-class art form any more than you should choose the person you fall in love with based on his or her "class". I fell in love with the musical theatre form when I was a kid, and the music I write for it is an amalgam of the classical, theatre, pop and folk music I loved as a child and continue to love. I suppose I could have made more money if I'd fallen in love with "rap", or in an earlier age, "disco", but I didn't. Similarly, I would probably have made less money if I had fallen in love with the music of Schoenberg and the twelve-tone composers (which I also didn't.) The point is that I don't think you can concern yourself with commercial considerations. I believe if you write what comes from you, honestly from your heart, and if you have talent and perseverance, the rest will take care of itself, usually in ways you could never have anticipated or planned for. Good luck! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Question About New (Altered) Lyrics

Question:

When a party asks for and receives permission to use one of your songs in something other than a show, is your permission directly sought if the party wishes to alter lyrics? For instance, I've noticed David Kelley has used your music in his shows (in Picket Fences and most recently in Ally McBeal). In the case of Ally McBeal, "Think about your life, Pippin," became "Think about your life, Happy," in reference to one of the characters. Did you approve this change directly or was it approved through an agency of some sort? If someone else approves it, do they have guidelines supplied by you which dictates what sorts of changes other parties are allowed to make?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Good question. Usually I am asked for permission if someone wants to change a lyric for another use of a song of mine. In the specific case of ALLY McBEAL, the truth is I had no idea the song was being used until I saw the episode. I assume the show cleared the usage with EMI, who publish the PIPPIN score, and because the only lyric change made was the substitution of the name "Happy" for "Pippin", it wasn't felt my permission was necessary. At least, I HOPE that's the case. Actually since I'm a fan of the show, I was delighted to hear one of my songs on it. But yeah, someone should have asked me. Thanks for your question. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Similar Songs

Question:

I remember watching a special on "Pocohontas" during my young days as a budding Schwartz fan in which Alan Menken (I was already a Menken fan in full bloom) spoke passionately about playing one's songs and thinking that they sound like someone else's. He said something to the effect of, "It's scary, because at the moment you've written your best melody, it sounds like someone else's."

My question is, and this is a question I'm surprised hasn't been asked before on this wonderful discussion board is: Have you ever written a song, only to find that some thematic material had been accidentally taken from something you'd heard at some point in your life? If so, is the disappointment different if you're just improvising on the piano or on guitar and find that you are reproducing someone else's theme, versus having lived with the song for six months only to realize that, say, the chorus is from a song you heard on the radio in 1980?

In any event, I hope that you are well. On a related theme (again, pardon the pun), I realized something fascinating and interesting and fun, a connection between the music for "Chanson" and "Nothing To Do With Love." The first notes of the first English verse of "Chanson" (the notes that accompany the lyric "Every day as you do") are the same notes of the chorus of "Nothing To Do With Love" (the notes that accompany the lyric "This has nothing to do"). I just think it's funny, how the word "do" is "coincidental" between the two. Just a fun observation. Thank you again (and again and again) for providing us with last and this century's most memorable, passionate and honest music. Have fun post-producing!
Michael Dube

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Michael: How clever of you to notice the similarity in the melodies of "Chanson" and "Nothing to do with Love". I must say, I was totally unaware of it until you pointed it out. It is slightly embarrassing to feel that I'm unconsciously repeating myself, but I guess my melodic instincts just flow that particular way. In terms of your question: I have often come up with a melody that sounds so (for want of a better word) "inevitable" to me that I can't believe someone hasn't written it before and I am merely parroting back a memory. At points such as this, I will play it for several people, making them promise not to laugh when they tell me it's "Hey, Jude" or something. We all live in fear of doing what the character in John Guare's play HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES does: rewrite "White Christmas" with different lyrics. I have had a couple of occasions where I have heard a song of mine years after I've written it and suddenly realized the similarity in a melodic or harmonic line to something else. For obvious reasons, I am not going to tell you which specific songs they were, but I will confirm it is a horrifying experience. But all you can do is shrug it off and continue to try to be careful not to let it happen again. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 6 - Technical Song Notation points and Piano/Vocal Preparations

Sibelius/Songwriting Methods/When to Write What?

Question:

Did you write some or all of Wicked, Pippin, Godspell, or any of your other musicals using a music writing program like Sibelius, etc?

Did you write the main themes of Wicked, Pippin, Godspell, or any of your other musicals in front of a piano by trial and error? Would it be bad to write the final first? Or would it be better to write the whole musical and then create the final to reflect everything that has been written before it?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I use a music writing program only for transcription, after the song is finished, to have a piano/vocal score that's easy for everyone to read. I almost always compose at the piano, and so I guess you could describe the method as trial and error, though it feels more automatic and unconscious than that. But yes, at its most basic level, I guess it is "trial and error", as I play things, reject them or modify them, and eventually settle on something I like. In terms of writing the "Finale" first -- when I'm starting on a show, I usually take the "path of least resistance" -- that is, I start with the song that's clearest to me. If in the case of your project, it's the Finale, then there's nothing wrong with starting with it. Wherever you start, I think it's important for you to recognize that it's highly unlikely the first song you write will wind up in the show, at least not in the form you originally write it. You'll just have learned too much more about your project as you keep writing to be entirely satisfied with your first effort. So you might as well start with the Finale, if that's what you have in your head. Best wishes and good luck with your project, Stephen Schwartz

Notation Software

Question:

This is for anyone who can give me input. I am in the process of buying software for my computer to handle music notation and transcription. I'll no mention the shareware I'm currently trying out. The question is based on experience what's the most useful at a reasonable price? I'm clueless. Mr Schwartz as a songwriter have you found these programs to be helpful? Thanks. Rick

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Rick: Yes, extremely useful. But they take some time to learn. (I assume you have a MIDI keyboard set-up, right?) Finale is the most popular notation program, but it is not very user friendly, though it is easier now than when it was first released. There are good (and easier) transcription programs as part of the most popular sequencing programs: Digital Performer, Studio Vision, and Logic. I have worked with people who swear by each of them. Good luck! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Note added later:

Stephen Schwartz used Sibelius to notate his opera.

Home Studio for Recording Demos

Question:

I was wondering if you have a home studio for recording demos and if so, how it is equipped (ADAT? keyboards, piano, favorite mike, sequencer, etc.). I'm always interested in an artist's studio. Also, do you write out the musical notation on paper when composing?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for the question. I do have a home studio which I use mostly for demos and for music notation. Rather than an ADAT, I have a DA-88, but I actually don't use it very much, as nearly all recording gets done directly into the computer using ProTools. I have a pretty basic set-up at my New York apartment/office in mid-town Manhattan and a much fuller set-up downtown which I share with the MIDI engineer and arranger I usually work with. Downtown we have an extensive sampler library of orchestral and percussion sounds. Probably my favorite synths are Rolands, just because I've always been partial to the sparkly quality of Roland sounds. However, when I write, it's nearly always on

acoustic piano. In terms of writing things down: I will scribble something out just to remember it, and if I need to do a lead-sheet for someone, I'll nearly always do that by hand because it's faster. But to transcribe piano parts, I now use a system involving the Yamaha Disklavier, which has been a God-send in terms of time-saving. (The Disklavier is a full acoustic grand piano with a MIDI attachment.) I play a song on the Disklavier, since I don't feel I play as well on MIDI keyboards, even the best-weighted models. Then we will send the piano part from the Disklavier into my computer, and edit it and correct it in one of the sequencing programs. Then when we print it out, I have a beautifully legible copy of what I actually play. I love this system! In terms of miking, I have found for my voice, it's more a matter of the EQ put on it rather than the mike itself, but I'm not very knowledgeable about studio engineering (I don't really know the names of mikes, etc., and leave that to the guys I work with.) Incidentally, my sometime writing partner, Alan Menken, is way more hands-on in his home studio than I am in mine. Hope this answers some of your questions; thanks for writing. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Composing Question; BMI Related

Question:

Dear Stephen, I am currently preparing to apply for the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop. As I prepare my three songs and make every effort to make the sheet music as accurate and relevant to my intentions as possible I have come across a few problems that I wondered if someone as experienced and acclaimed as yourself could shed some light on.

Basically, when you get to being asked to write a musical or are given the opportunity to put your own musical into production, how much does the music that is written down matter? Is it more normal to meet with a team and play the score through yourself or to give out "dummy" scores to represent the music as it stands? Can lead sheets or recordings suffice until you begin to work with a musical team?

I ask this because I do not have a problem getting my music down on paper but it is just that my piano parts never truly represent what I play or what I imagine a pit band to do. I also bare in mind that the score to a musical is constantly evolving and changing. There is so much more I wish to ask you but I shall keep it at that as I realise you are INCREDIBLY busy. May I also thank you for taking the time to answer your fans questions, I can think of no other composer who does it in such an accesible and helpful way. Thankyou for any help and advice. William

Answer from Stephen SchwartzZ:

Dear William: First of all, let me reassure you that no one's piano parts truly represent what they play or how they imagine the song to sound with a pit band or orchestra. Every time I play a song, it's slightly different, so the piano part is a kind of synthesis of that. Also, with show music (like pop, and as opposed to opera or art songs), one anticipates that the performers are going to make contributions in terms of phrasing, alternate notes, etc. That being said, the written music definitely does matter. It's what everybody is going to be working from, so the more fully it can represent your intentions, the better.

Yes, a lead sheet can be fine, if the song is the kind of song that will then get arranged, but you need to recognize that a lead sheet is open to more interpretation than a piano/vocal. Of course you will be around to let your music team know what you want. Sometimes I do lead sheets, for songs that are strongly pop-oriented and I know will need a rhythm section to interpret them, but more often, I do piano/vocal parts. I should add, because of the specific nature of your question, that I have no idea what the BMI workshop requires for their application in terms of the completeness of music submitted; the above observations have to do with preparing a show. I hope these rambling thoughts are of some use to you. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Advice on Notation/Lyrics

Question:

From a 12 year old fan who wrote to Stephen for advice: "I can pick out good tunes on the keyboard, but it is notating it that I have trouble with. See, when I improvise, which I do a ton, the melodies are usually very complicated and often too hard to record. To me, to have someone else write down what I play wouldn't be as authentic. And, then come the lyrics. I have excelled wonderfully in my writing assignments, but just can't seem to come up with the clever, catchy words and rhyming phrases that you do. However, I suppose if I really thought about it, I'd do a pretty good job."

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I know a lot of very good and successful composers who have trouble with notation, and who do work with someone who helps them get music prepared so others can play the work. So you needn't feel less "authentic" about it. You can of course learn notation, and it will get easier the more you do it, just like speaking another language. And these days, there are very good computer programs that will convert sequences into written music -- if you have a MIDI keyboard and/or access to one of those programs (Finale, Logic, etc.), you might find that helpful. As to lyrics: I think lyric writing is more of a "craft" than an "art", in that it is a skill that develops with time and practice. So don't worry if at your age your lyrics are not at the level of facility of Stephen Sondheim's. Neither were his at age 12! Just keep writing, and I promise you, you will get better and things will get easier. Best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

Manuscript etc.....

Question:

Dear Stephen: I'm half way through my music GCSE course (British exam thing...) and its amazing! We do a lot of composition which I adore but for the actual putting the notes to manuscript. I have become much better at it, and quite quick at it, now that the structure and layout is there etc, we use a software called 'Sibelius 4' which helps if we get really stuck. For someone who writes as much music as you do, do you use computer software? what do you do if your just somewhere random and something comes to you, do you find writing on manuscript/staved paper easy? is it something that just happened or did you take a while to master it! It'd be really interesting to find out:) Sophie 15UK

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Hi Sophie: I have the opposite problem from you -- I'm so used to writing music out by hand, it's harder for me to learn to use software. For this new project of mine, an opera I am composing, I will be using Sibelius (after much vacillating between that and Finale, enough people told me Sibelius was much easier to learn to convince me.) I have heretofore worked with a musical assistant named John Angier who uses Logic, so that I can play the keyboard parts in and then John and I edit them together; I assume that's more or less how we'll work in Sibelius, though i really am going to make an effort to learn it myself. But the old pencil and staff paper is still easier for me. It just takes a bit of time to get facile at it, sort of like learning a language. But if you wish to practice, I'm sure it will get easier and easier for you the more you do it. Of course, with computer transcription becoming the state of the art, you may not need to. Thanks and best, Stephen Schwartz

Writing Piano Scores

I was wondering, when you write a song, do you create the piano part while creating the melody, or do you write a melody and chords (as in a lead sheet) and then decide on things to put in the piano part?

The reason I am asking is because I have recently written a few songs while creating the piano part at the same time. In the past, however, I created songs with nothing more than the chords and a melody. However, when I attempted to make the song into a piano score, I ended up not wanting to change the way the song sounded with just chords. Of course, there are many songs with moments of just chords, but an entire score of chords seems like it would become boring to the ear very quickly.

The songs I created recently writing the melody along with the piano accompaniment have yielded better results, but the scores are quite busy and involved. Also, these songs that I have written in this style have been more classical than I normally write, and generally harder to sing. I'm also afraid of how they would turn out if they were orchestrated.

From other posts, I have gathered that you write both lead sheets and piano scores. How much is enough in the piano part? (I'm talking about the part that the piano plays, as I know that scores like Company have certain parts already written out that the composer wants.) For example, in the second part of No Good Deed (after the lyric of My generous supply) there is a run that starts on the e of beat 1. I believe a clarinet is playing it. It is running 16th notes with a small "hiccup" in between on the e of beat 3 and 1. Is that a part of the original score you created, or something the orchestrator added in? Sorry for the length of my questions, Byron

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I assume you are referring to the score given to the orchestrator, as opposed to the published score. I will occasionally include other lines that go beyond the ability of a song to be played by a single pianist, if I feel those lines are (pardon the pun) instrumental to the song. But a lot of times I will just discuss these possibilities verbally with the orchestrator, as I like to leave them flexibility to come up with inner lines of their own that will surprise me.

I tend to try to publish a score that is playable by a single pianist, as I know how frustrating I found it as an accompanist when I would try to play from something where I had to keep jumping from line to line to try to arrive at an acceptable piano part. Some of my earlier published scores, where (out of inexperience and ignorance) I was less involved with overseeing the final product, are more prone to that than the more recent ones, such as CHILDREN OF EDEN and now WICKED. I hope I have not misunderstood your question and that this answers it sufficiently for you. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Reply from Byro

Sorry about the confusion. I tried to be somewhat concise, and may have lost a thorough explanation of my question. Yes, I indeed was referring to the piano/vocal draft given to an orchestrator directly from your originals. Commercially available vocal books are somewhat of a nuisance if an instrumental line is included. Thank you for your enlightenment.

Question and Answer for Thesis

The following questions and Stephen Schwartz's subsequent answers form part of the research for a Thesis entitled 'IF I SING: MOMENTS OF TRANSITION WITHIN THE MUSICAL THEATRE' by Matthew Lockitt in partial completion of the Honours Degree at Monash University (Melbourne) October 2002

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Mr. Lockitt: Those are really good questions, and I have tried to find the time to respond fully and articulately. I hope these will prove of help with your thesis.

Question:

What is it that makes some moments demand a song and once that moment has been identified, does the character or the mood become the major concern in the physical construction of the transition?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

This is always a decision based on the instincts and experience of the songwriter(s). The classic response is the dictum ascribed to Oscar Hammerstein (I have no idea if he actually said it or not) that a character should sing when the emotion has become too high for ordinary speech. That's certainly one criterion, but I can think of several successful musical theatre songs to which it doesn't apply. Another consideration is that a song extends a given moment or beat and focuses on it more. Therefore, the choice of what is musicalized is an indication of what characters and ideas the writers think are important. It's been said that a character in a musical doesn't really land until he or she sings, and I think that's true. And if there are important themes or ideas, they need to be sung about too. Lastly, there is the sense of the rhythm of the story-telling that leads one to feel "We need some energy here" or "We need to laugh here" or "This is the point where we should find out what the show is really saying". All these factors go into making the decision, which as I say is usually instinctive. For instance, when I worked on animated features for Disney and DreamWorks, I (or I and Alan Menken) would look at a board with the story outlined on individual notecards very early on in the process. And we would be able to say something like "I think this card should be turned into a song", or "I think there should be a song between these two cards" or "These two or three cards can be combined into a song". In other words, it has to do with a sense of the architecture of the whole show.

Once the decision is made, I would say both character and mood are important in constructing the transition into song. You want to feel that it is as seamless as possible. I will elaborate more in my answer to the next question.

Question:

In what ways do you attempt to make the transition as "natural" and as acceptable to an audience as possible?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

In one of my ASCAP workshops, lyricist Susan Birkenhead said something I have always remembered. She said she often asks herself, when beginning a song for a character that comes out of dialogue, "What is the next sound the character must make?" The transition from dialogue into singing is the trickiest aspect in writing the traditional book musical and the one that most often separates the amateur from the professional. A few factors that help: The line or lines preceding the song need(s) to build into it, so that there is a kind of gathering of momentum or emphasis that flows into singing. Sometimes a joke or a strong declaration can help. Underscoring preceding the song can be useful, setting the musical mood before the character actually starts singing. Conversely, simply launching into the song out of dialogue and having the music come in under the first line of the song can also work.

Question:

How do you decide upon what sort of musical language the characters should "speak"?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Again, this is instinctive. Usually, I like the bookwriter to have done some work, so I get a feeling for the character's speech patterns and levels of intelligence, energy, articulateness, and literacy. The music

should feel as if it belongs to that character; without speaking the language in which the lyrics are written, the audience should be able to tell what kind of person is singing the song and what he or she is feeling. How fast the music moves, how much drive it has, how dissonant it is -- all these things are factors in creating the character. Some choices are more obvious than others -- the waitress in WORKING, who is Italian and fancies herself a performer when she is working, is accompanied by music that suggests Verdi. Pocahontas sings to music that implies Native American tonalities, whereas the English Governor Ratcliffe sings a song that is derived from an old English sea chanty. Some are subtler -- Eve's and Cain's songs in CHILDREN OF EDEN have more drive to their music than Adam's and Noah's. But the musical language is sending all sorts of signals about who the character is that the writer needs to take into account.

Question:

How do you reconcile the demands of the narrative and character with the formulaic demands of the genre?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Another good question. The ability to shape a song that makes sense as a song, yet still reflects the character and moves the story along, is what separates the good musical theatre composers and lyricists from the inferior ones. I don't mean that all musical theatre songs should be able to be lifted out of their contexts and still work as songs. But there needs to be a sense of song structure -- of returning to music or lines of lyric, of building to a hand, etc. -- that the genre demands. When one gets to a spot in a show that one wants to musicalize, it's often a good idea to come up with a title for the song that sort of coalesces the idea of the moment and helps to focus the song. Other decisions -- such as is this a song with a repeated chorus? Is this a song that builds to a big finish? -- also come into play here. Ideally, the audience should feel BOTH that it has experienced a song AND that the show has been advanced. A tricky combination.

I hope these answers have been specific and articulate enough for you. I wish you the best with your thesis. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR SONGWRITERS

Also see Stephen Schwartz's advice on Creativity, and his comments on his career, Orchestration, etc in this Forum archive.

For information about the annual ASCAP Musical Theatre Workshops, Stephen Schwartz, director, go to <http://www.musicalschwartz.com/ascap.htm>

To find out about the Dramatists Guild -- playwrights, lyricists, and composers community, for which Stephen Schwartz is president, go to <http://www.dramatistsguild.com/>

For perspectives from Stephen Schwartz on the making of musicals see Carol de Giere's biography "Defying Gravity: the Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz, from Godspell to Wicked." www.DefyingGravityTheBook.com

For books about writing musicals see <http://www.musicalwriters.com/books/books.htm>

For examples of regional theatres that produce new musicals see the Growing Stages column of <http://www.musicalwriters.com/news/news.htm>

For songwriting marketing and other tips see Jimmy Webb's book "Tunesmith: Inside The Art of Songwriting"