

Sul Ross State University, Fall 2014
Musical Theatre Ensemble
MUS 1112, Section 004, CRN 13574
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:00-3:15 pm
FAB 200

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Description and Purpose

The purpose of this class is to prepare the music for the Spring 2015 production of *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, which will be directed by Bret Scott. Performance dates are March 28-April 4, 2015. Evening rehearsals will begin in January 2015. Enrollment is open to all students, regardless of their musical skills or experience.

The story of Sweeney Todd has been around now for over 200 years, and in 1973, British playwright Christopher Bond turned it into a successful straight play, seeing Sweeney as a tragic figure ultimately destroyed by his need for revenge. So why did Hugh Wheeler, who wrote the book, and Stephen Sondheim, who wrote the music and lyrics, turn Bond's play into a musical? As Larry Brown writes in his website, *Sondheim Notes*:

Whereas Bond's play jumps from a dark corner to say, "Boo!" Sondheim's musical thriller engulfs the imagination and retreats into the darkness, taking the spectator with it. Sondheim feels that the addition of music greatly increases the size of any drama, transforming it into a different theatrical experience: "What I did to Chris' play is more than enhance it. I had a feeling it would be a new animal. . . . Hal Prince [the director] gave it an epic sense, a sense that this was a man of some size instead of just a nut case. The music helps to give it that dimension." . . .

Music is indeed the mystical power behind the engrossing impact of *Sweeney Todd*. Over eighty percent of the production is set to music, either sung or orchestrated underneath dialogue. The score is one vast structure, each individual part meshing with others for the good of the entire musical machine. Never before or since in his work has Sondheim utilized music in such an exhaustive capacity to further the purposes of the drama.

From *Sondheim Notes*, by Larry Brown: <http://larryavisbrown.homestead.com/files/sondheim/sweeneytodd.htm>
(See more extensive quote at the end of this syllabus.)

Or as our director, Bret Scott, put it:

"The passion of each character is so great that it can't be expressed in speech alone—it must be sung."

Attendance and Attitude

Our production will require a total commitment from all of us. All of the vocal parts, especially those of the crowd scenes, are quite challenging, with extreme ranges, awkward intervals and sharp dissonances with other parts. Regular and punctual attendance, mutual respect, and cooperative teamwork are essential.

Singing is an athletic activity that uses muscles throughout our bodies, so all rehearsals will begin with physical and vocal warm-ups. Please wear comfortable clothing and shoes that allow you to move and breathe freely.

Grading

Grading is based upon attendance and active participation; everyone enrolled in the class will be cast in the show, and everyone is needed. All absences, excused or unexcused, count against your grade as follows, and any tardy will be counted as ½ absence:

- 1 absence (excused or unexcused) = A**
- 2 absences (excused or unexcused) = B**
- 3 absences (excused or unexcused) = C**
- 4 or 5 absences (excused or unexcused) = D**
- 6 absences (excused or unexcused) = F and you will be dropped from the course**

Schedule (subject to revision as our rehearsals progress)

Tuesday, August 26:	Introductions, class overview and requirements, schedule auditions, begin read-through of show
Thursday, August 28:	Finish read-through of show; examine dramatic reason for each song
Tuesday, September 2:	Auditions and voice placement
Thursday, September 4:	Auditions and voice placement
Tuesday, September 9:	Ballad of Sweeney Todd; City on Fire
Thursday, September 11:	Ballad of Sweeney Todd; City on Fire
Tuesday, September 16:	Pirelli's Miracle Elixir; God That's Good
Thursday, September 18:	Pirelli's Miracle Elixir; God That's Good
Tuesday, September 23:	Fogg's Asylum; City on Fire; Searching
Thursday, September 25:	Fogg's Asylum; City on Fire; Searching
Tuesday, September 30:	Run-through of show, Act I
Thursday, October 2:	Run-through of show, Act II
Tuesday, October 7:	Review Company Numbers; Solos TBA
Thursday, October 9:	Review Company Numbers; Solos TBA
Tuesday, October 14:	Review Company Numbers; Solos TBA
Thursday, October 16:	Review Company Numbers; Solos TBA
Tuesday, October 21:	Review Company Numbers; Solos TBA
Thursday, October 23:	No class—ACTF
Tuesday, October 28:	Check individual mastery of vocal parts
Thursday, October 30:	Check individual mastery of vocal parts
Tuesday, November 4:	Off-book: Run-through of show, Act I
Thursday, November 6:	Off-book: Run-through of show, Act II
Tuesday, November 11:	Off-book: Review Company Numbers; Solos TBA
Thursday, November 13:	Off-book: Review Company Numbers; Solos TBA
Tuesday, November 18:	Off-book: Review Company Numbers; Solos TBA
Thursday, November 20:	Off-book: Review Company Numbers; Solos TBA
Tuesday, November 25:	Review Company Numbers; evaluate the semester's progress; discuss rehearsal schedule for Spring 2015; distribute rehearsal recordings to use over the break
Thursday, November 27:	No class—Thanksgiving
Tuesday, December 2:	No class—NYC trip

Student Learning Objectives (Expected Learning Outcomes)

Students will:

1. receive an introduction to musical theater;
2. sing in a manner consistent with the healthy use of the voice;
3. learn all the music for their assigned vocal parts for "Sweeney Todd";
4. listen and sing cooperatively;
5. evaluate their singing experience;
6. understand aspects of music reading; and
7. participate in a cross-campus experience for majors and non-majors interested in musical theater.

Program Learning Outcomes for Music are:

The graduating student will demonstrate that he/she:

1. Is able to integrate appropriate musical expression into performance
2. Is able to prepare appropriate program notes
3. Is able to evaluate and critique a musical performance
4. Has a general knowledge of music history

Accommodating Students with Disabilities:

Sul Ross State University is committed to equal access in compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1973. It is the student's responsibility to initiate a request for accessibility services. Students seeking accessibility services must contact Mary Schwartz, M. Ed., L.P.C., in Counseling and Accessibility Services, Ferguson Hall, Room 112. The mailing address is P.O. Box C-122, Sul Ross State University, Alpine, Texas 79832. Telephone: 432-837-8203. E-mail: mschwartz@sulross.edu.

From *Sondheim Notes*, by Larry Brown

<http://larryavisbrown.homestead.com/files/sondheim/sweeneytodd.htm>

Musical mayhem

Whereas Bond's play jumps from a dark corner to say, "Boo!" Sondheim's musical thriller engulfs the imagination and retreats into the darkness, taking the spectator with it. Sondheim feels that the addition of music greatly increases the size of any drama, transforming it into a different theatrical experience: "What I did to Chris' play is more than enhance it. I had a feeling it would be a new animal. . . . Hal Prince gave it an epic sense, a sense that this was a man of some size instead of just a nut case. The music helps to give it that dimension" (interview). . . .

Music is indeed the mystical power behind the engrossing impact of *Sweeney Todd*. Over eighty percent of the production is set to music, either sung or orchestrated underneath dialogue. The score is one vast structure, each individual part meshing with others for the good of the entire musical machine. Never before or since in his work has Sondheim utilized music in such an exhaustive capacity to further the purposes of the drama.

The production opens with a street chorus singing "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd," a theme that winds through the catacombs of this tale, popping up in unexpected places. When at times the charm of such numbers as "By the Sea" and "Not While I'm Around" may temporarily invoke an untroubled world, the ballad re-appears to remind the listener of mysterious forces at work underneath the surface. To create a sense of gloom, Sondheim begins the piece in a very low register and adds a scurrying, low accompanying figure that periodically crescendos slightly as if something were about to happen and then does not (London Weekend Television interview). In this show, song is almost inseparable from dialogue; there are no comment songs, no inner monologues and no narrators as in previous shows. Nevertheless, the ballad establishes an overall presentational quality to the drama:

Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd. □ He served a dark and a vengeful god. □ What happens then – well, that's the play, □ And he wouldn't want us to give it away, □ Not Sweeney, □ Not Sweeney Todd. □ The Demon Barber of Fleet Street.

Within the ballad appears the first of many leitmotif phrases that return to haunt the mind, uttering unspoken secrets. As the chorus rises to a climactic "Swing your razor wide, Sweeney! Hold it to the skies!" the melodic line sounds the *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath) motif from the 13th century Mass for the Dead (we hear this traditional theme also in Rachmaninoff's symphonies and Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*). Later the motif recurs in other guises as well. When Sweeney sings to his razors, the phrase "See this one shine, How he smiles in the light, My friend" is an inversion of the *Dies Irae*. In "Epiphany" the motif appears subtly in the low brass accompaniment starting just before the lines "They all deserve to die! Tell you why, Mrs. Lovett, Tell you why." On this day of wrath Sweeney's razor becomes the Grim Reaper's sickle as he executes justice on the human race for its sins.

Sondheim carefully delineates characters with his musical touch. On his first entrance Anthony's "There's no place like London!" soars joyfully; when sung by Todd, it falls into a minor key. In another instance Toby's innocent "Nothing's gonna harm you, Not while I'm around" turns into a menacing reprise as Todd and Lovett search for the young escapee who now knows too much. Clearly nothing but harm is on their minds.

Rapid changes of meter occur in several numbers, notably in Mrs. Lovett's "The Worst Pies in London" where "the dislocations in the meter give emphasis to her attempts to swat the flies that plague her as she kneads the dough: 4/4, 2/4, 3/4, 5/4, 3/4, 5/4, 4/4, etc" (Blyton 23). This song is an excellent example of Sondheim's ability to integrate music with the action of the character, providing the actor specific business to play. "Those of us who write songs should stage each number within an inch of its life in our own heads when we write. . . . They may not use anything in your blueprint at all, but they have something to work on, something to build from" (Sondheim, "Musical Theater" 17).

Crowds act as more than a chorus in this musical. Sondheim dislikes choral pieces in traditional operas where everyone assembles to sing the same music and lyrics for no reason. Like Richard Wagner, he feels that only the music is served in such cases, not the drama (London interview). In "Pirelli's Miracle Elixir" Sondheim splits the crowd into several factions, some in favor of the elixir, others against it; many are totally uninterested. This variety of reactions is more natural and exciting than one homogeneous response, mirroring the audience's feelings of ambiguity about Todd. Although the contest is obviously constructed to win support for Todd as the crowd applauds wildly in his favor, knowing that Sweeney is only trying to lure the Beadle into his trap makes the audience somewhat uneasy over joining the applause.

This dramatic tension is produced not only by the content of the lyrics but also by several musical elements throughout the score. Wittke writes, "[Sondheim's] prevalent use of the blue note [a flatted 3rd or 7th in a major scale] makes the major and

minor pitches unstable and generates the necessary psychological ambiguity of the show" (311). The minor mode, common in English folk music but rare in Broadway musicals, is quite distinctive in such songs as "These are my Friends." Although use of the minor key does not always indicate mysterious and sinister moods, here it combines with haunting lyrics as a foreboding sign that Sweeney's sanity might be in question; establishing a spiritual bond with one's razors is not exactly the occupation of a sound mind.

Several songs use the tritone or augmented 4th (play C and F# on the piano), called the *diabolus in musica* for its sinister sound, which Wittke notes is a perfect symbol for this show. For example, the first act closes on a harmonic tritone as this demonic duo sings the final chords of "A Little Priest." Intermission must have been an uncomfortable hiatus.

The most terrifying use of music in the production is undoubtedly Sweeney's "Epiphany." Although frightening in its own way, "A Little Priest" is comic relief next to this nightmarish number. This pair of songs at the end of Act I is the most significant musical addition which Sondheim made to Bond's version. In the play Sweeney's mental collapse and the subsequent "Meat Pie Connection" take place in less than half a page of dialogue, much too quickly for the full psychological impact. Sondheim carefully reveals the developing ideas in Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett's demented minds.

Sondheim took a month to mix motifs, monstrous dissonances, and the *Dies Irae* for the proper blend of madness in "Epiphany." The music is jarring, frenetic, leaping back and forth between phrases as Sweeney's mind begins to crack. The judge's escape has pushed him beyond the point of no return. Now his price is all mankind:

Not one man, no, Nor ten men Nor a hundred Can assuage me . . . And I will get him back Even as he gloats. In the meantime I'll practice On less honorable throats.

The title of the piece is significant. One definition of "epiphany" reads: "A sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something; an intuitive grasp of reality." Sweeney discerns at this point that revenge is not a short and easy road and that there is little justice in this world, but perhaps another meaning is more appropriate: "An incarnation of a god or a divine being." Sweeney does not merely change directions; he has become the earthly emissary of ultimate darkness. In a mad vision he has "heard music that nobody heard" and must obey the summons of his "dark and hungry god."

After a psychologically motivated first act, the rest of the show is mostly action. However, Sondheim uses previously developed musical themes to make thematic connections between past and present. The melody of "Pirelli's Miracle Elixir" is heard again with altered lyrics in "More Hot Pies," indicating that the pies, like the elixir, are not exactly what they seem. As the song continues, a customer asks Mrs. Lovett for her recipe. She slyly avoids revealing her "family" secret, but the answer comes when the same tune is used to describe both Sweeney's chair and the pies "fit for a king." If only the patron could hear it, music would point to the source of these succulent treats.

As the new barber chair "swings into place from the heavens like a gift from the wrong kind of gods" (Kerr), and the butcher and the baker prepare for the arrival of "fresh supplies," Todd and Lovett's exchange, "Psst! Excuse me. Psst! Dear, see to the customers" is a fragmented version of the scurrying madness motif in the orchestration of "No Place Like London" and the beginning of "Epiphany." The results of Todd's insanity are now manifesting themselves in very ominous ways.

In his most inventive use of motifs, Sondheim tantalizes the audience with musical clues as to the true identity of the Beggar Woman. Very subtly he suggests a connection between the falling semitones of her "Alms! Alms!" and Sweeney's phrase, "Lucy lies in ashes." Later, in Act 2, as she is looking for the Beadle, orchestration from "There was a Barber and his Wife" plays just before her entrance. Seeing the barbershop rekindles old memories in her addled brain; her crazed song, "Beadle deedle deedle dumpling," the same tune she sung to proposition Sweeney and Anthony at their first meeting ("Ow would you like a little squiff, dear, A little jig jig"), was the music which played so elegantly at the Judge's party many years earlier on the night of her rape. Finally, when Sweeney in his haste slashes the Beggar Woman's throat, the "Lucy lies in ashes" theme rises from the orchestra as a terrible dirge. Fate has had the last laugh: Sweeney's sins have killed the only thing he ever loved.