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Music as Literature, Literature as Music

Combining aurality and text in *Street Scene*

The story of Street Scene has been realized to high acclaim many times over as a play and as an opera. Each is exceptionally inventive and employs intermediality—the practice of creating a piece within a single medium while referencing, either literally or structurally, other mediums—to reach critical and popular success. Playwright Elmer Rice turned to music, which inspired his structure and introduced polyphony into his play Street Scene. He also incorporated the musical quality of repetition into his play and made it central to his characters’ oppressive social immobility. In his opera version of the story, composer Kurt Weill transformed literature into music to create uniform mental images similar to those evoked by words, and reversed Rice’s rejection of the narrating role by including arias in his opera. Each version of Street Scene has managed to transcend the limitations of its medium by reaching across the arts to convey the powerful and moving themes of alienation, loneliness, and diversity.

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The story of *Street Scene* is a glimpse into the life of a community of working-class New Yorkers spanning multiple ethnicities, professions, and generations. Elmer Rice won the 1929 Pulitzer Prize for the play, which spawned the highly acclaimed theatre-opera, premiering 17 years later, composed by Kurt Weill with lyrics by Langston Hughes. Revolving around two main plot points of unrequited love and scandalous murder, the story’s distinction lies not in its immediate action, but in what Frank Durham (1970/2009) describes as its startling likeness to reality. The primary objective of the story for Rice was to provide a realistic panorama of the lives of working-class ethnic New Yorkers in the post-World War I era (Mersand, 2001, p. 35). It deals with a breadth of real-life subject matter—birth, death, love, jealousy, bigotry, poverty, violence, and reconciliation (Kowalke, 1995, p. 39)—and is acclaimed for authentically depicting the working-class “struggl[e] to survive [in] the

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crushing reality of urban life” (Perkins, 2001). The story centres on the theme of alienation and loneliness in the crowded and cruel city, though Rice and Weill each convey this theme with an intermedial form of realism unique to the medium in which they operate.

Rice desired to provide a realistic slice of working-class ethnic New York life through sound, sight, and dialogue in his play; Weill (1947), believing that European opera had divorced itself too greatly from language and that theatre had lost its relation to music, aimed to invent “a special brand of musical theater that would completely integrate drama and music, spoken word, song and movement.” Intermediality is the practice of creating a piece within a single medium while referencing, either literally or structurally, other mediums. Both Rice and Weill explore the theme of alienation amongst the mosaic of working-class city dwellers by combining language with aurality within their respective art forms. Rice combines sound and musical structure with text, while Weill maximizes the dramatic potential of words by fusing Broadway musical and opera with literary technique. In doing so, both versions of *Street Scene* are more accurately able to depict the sentiment of oppression in working-class city life. I will explore in this paper how Rice and Weill establish, each in his own way, a sense of loneliness among the principal characters by reaching across artistic mediums. That sentiment is then juxtaposed against a diverse, populated, and busy environment—a “patterned mosaic” in Rice’s words—also produced through intermediality (Kowalke, 1995, p. 40).

EVOKING LONELINESS IN *STREET SCENE*

Loneliness is the primary theme for Rice and Weill, and both artists incorporate intermediality in order to emphasize the devastation that loneliness brings to each principal character. Both artists manipulate the role of the narrator through intermediality in order to most authentically express this theme, while Rice delves further into exploring the musical concept of repetition.

A significant characteristic that often distinguishes a play from other forms of literature is the lack of a narrator in a script. Music also has no narrator. Rice could have inserted a character who talks directly to the audience like a third-person narrator, or used soliloquies that act as first-person narration to translate emotion and thought on stage; yet, he chose not to. Omitting an explicit narrator stands in stark contrast to Weill’s choice on the matter. Rice left “innermost thoughts, feelings, and dreams to be expressed in other ways [aside from language] on the stage,” whereas “Weill hoped that music would then fill in these scenes” (Thuleen, 1997). The aria is the soliloquy’s musical equivalent, and although Rice chooses not to employ the soliloquy in his source text, Weill inserts its musical counterpart into his opera (Thuleen, 1997). As a result, the aria-soliloquies give insight into character development that otherwise does not explicitly exist in the play. Sam’s laments about living at the tenement and being in love with Rose are implied in the play, but never

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explicitly articulated as they are in the opera. Mrs. Maurrant's aria "Somehow I Never Could Believe" gives her character depth as the audience hears her inner thoughts, which are never expressed in the same manner in the play. Moreover, "the only musical numbers to receive overtly operatic generic labels . . . are sung by the four principals," while the shallowest characters, like Mae Jones or Mr. Easter, sing the most "conventional" songs (Kowalke, 1995, pp. 42, 45). In essence, this means that the deviation from the popular-styled songs determines a character's complexity and depth. Here, Weill is leaning on the music to explicitly convey information about narrative structure (i.e., which characters the audience should identify as "main" characters) (Kowalke, 1995, p. 45). The arias shape the characters in such a way as to differentiate them from those of the source text; an example is Mrs. Maurrant's "A Boy Like You," which depicts her as far more maternal than how Rice portrays her. Weill also draws on music to emphasize emotional high points in the story, relying on it to communicate to audiences explicitly when they should experience heavy emotions (Thuleen, 1997). The opera's arias are adept at conveying the emotional struggles and laments of the main characters of the story; yet these additions mirror the role of the narrator that traditionally exists in literature and not in opera (and which does not exist in Rice's text). "The entire musical score thus becomes a form of storytelling" (Weill, 1946). Weill embraces the literary narrator as storyteller of internal thoughts.

Meanwhile, Rice's lack of narrator can be considered akin to instrumental music, which is especially apt at expressing emotions but not at explicitly telling a story (Wolf, 1999, p. 32). The reader learns how the characters feel in Rice's *Street Scene* largely when those characters tell one another, within the play, about those feelings. Otherwise, they are forced to infer from other hints in order to determine a character's inner thoughts. This ambiguity and open interpretation brings the play closer to music, since musical cues suggest but never explicitly define a narrative or story. Listeners often invent their own story based on suggestions made by the music and taking into consideration social connotations. The fragmented structure of the play turns readers into emotional detectives all the more, forcing them to make connections between past and present conversations in order to understand the current action or sentiment. Even the dialogue that is provided is often "emotional, rambling, without logic, and typically inconclusive," resulting in additional ambiguity (Durham, 1970/2009). Yet the theme of loneliness surfaces through conversations amongst the characters. The emotion is elicited, despite the text's omission of a narrator or of explicit instruction of internal thought.

Rice continues his intermedial project by employing verbatim repetition. Music relies on the recurrence of notes and melodies in order to move forward. From classical sonatas to modern pop ballads, a song is most recognizable by phrases played cyclically or layered on top of each other. In contrast, literature is not as tolerant of exact duplication as music (Wolf, 1999, p. 20); however, the closer

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literature gets to music, the more acceptable such reiteration often becomes (Wolf, 1999, p. 20). Poetry, for example, can often suitably exhibit this feature because of its semblance to music. Defying the restrictions of his medium, Rice sews verbatim repetition into his literature. Rice opens with Mrs. Jones commenting to Mrs. Fiorentino, "I hope it's hot enough for you." The line is quickly echoed by other characters again and again throughout the play in almost exactly the same way. This motif of "hot enough for you" becomes a frequently recited tune. The characters rely on this chime as a crutch for conversation, either as an introduction or as main subject matter, just as music depends on repeated sounds to propel forward and to develop. Importantly, the heat is a symbol of the oppression, frustration, and social stagnation that each character faces (Mantel, 2001). The characters lean on their symbolized immobility in order to make connections and to move the "plot" of their lives forward. By using musical repetition, Rice demonstrates the central role that oppressive and alienating social conditions play in the daily lives of this milieu.

THE PATTERNED MOSAIC OF *STREET SCENE*

The primary characters' loneliness and social immobility are juxtaposed against a persistent interconnectedness of many people, voices, and cultures. The constant intimate and boisterous environment is stiflingly alienating. In the intermedial tradition, Rice infuses his play with musical features like an assemblage of an orchestra and melody, while Weill imitates the literary effect on the imagination. Each artist also incorporates polyphony as it exists outside his respective medium in order to imply simultaneity.

While literature cannot be music, it can employ "ingenious linguistic means or special literary techniques" in order to imply, suggest, or imitate music indirectly (Scher, 1982, p. 229). One way in which Rice musicalizes his script is by integrating elements of music into the structure of his work. Rice's *Street Scene* has forty-three characters, most of whom have speaking roles, are differentiated from others by their occupation and social class, and do not share any specific relationship with many other characters (Mersand, 1941, p. 37). This symphony of characters mirrors an orchestra, where most instruments have voices that are distinct and differentiated from others based on their timbre and tone, as well as by the specific melody that one voice plays as compared to another. The *Street Scene* opera also has many instrumental voices, scored with a large orchestra in mind (Thuleen, 1997). In such an orchestra, while the voices play together, there is no inherent relationship between, say, the clarinet and the trombone given their different sounds, instrument groups, and roles in carrying the music. Like the voices in an orchestra, the characters in Rice's play form a mixture of voices that are joined together not by relationship but by chance (Petrusso, 2001). This assemblage of characters is reminiscent of the collection of instruments in an orchestra, and is one way in which Rice is able to

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allude to music through his medium in order to achieve his message of plurality in the city.

A second way in which Rice evokes music in order to illustrate the patterned mosaic backdrop of the city is through melody. In literature, melody is typically dependent on language; the standard intonations of the language often determine how a passage is pronounced (Wolf, 1999, pp. 15-16). Additionally, since prose is never regarded primarily as a genre of sound, its aurality is often disregarded, with readers opting to hear literature, if at all, in their internal voice (Wolf, 1999, p. 16; Scher, 1982, p. 229). As a result, “a special effort is needed to remind the reader of fiction of the original sound quality of the language whose letters he [or she] is perusing” (Wolf, 1999, p. 16). Rice makes this special effort of aurality and a specific melody in his reader’s mind through his characters’ “accents.” Most characters exhibit linguistic tendencies that reflect their ethnic background, from Mrs. Jones’s mild mispronunciations, to Filippo “Lippo” Fiorentino’s and Abraham Kaplan’s distinctly Italian and Yiddish intonations, respectively. Words often drop syllables or are misspelled in order to realize these accents. While it is true that “even if . . . sound may occasionally be conjured up in the reader’s mind, this is only possible for a short time,” so Rice’s continual use of accented written language imposes the characters’ voice quality and melody onto the reader (Wolf, 1999, p. 16). It is literally impossible to read Kaplan’s or Lippo’s dialogue—even internally—without hearing their heavy accents. Through this skilful and persistent technique, Rice is able to impose a melody to his written words, even as it exists in the reader’s mind. Moreover, given that the words in these characters’ speeches are so distorted from familiar spelling and pronunciation, one is inclined to read the text aloud to determine its meaning based on what one hears. This all the more thrusts an aural quality onto the text, changing the literary experience from silent reading to one of hearing.

Such accented dialogue has the additional musical effect of inserting leitmotif into the text. Each character in the written play is paired with an aural theme: an accent. The character constantly appears with this musical signature—the leitmotif—indicating when she or he is present in the action. Furthermore, unlike many other literary texts that emulate leitmotif through conceptual themes or repeated phrases, these accents are highly aural; therefore, not only do leitmotifs exist in this play, they exist as distinctly acoustic, pushing the text further into the realm of music.

In a similar fashion, Weill integrates elements of literature into his opera in order to achieve the same goals as Rice. The *Street Scene* opera is famous for combining elements from different and disparate genres in order to produce a new style of musical drama theatre, and Weill uses the plurality of genre to establish the density and busyness of the environment (Thuleen, 1997). This most obviously influences the audience’s feeling of *who* is present in the community. The variety of musical genres in the performance mirrors the many personalities, ethnicities, professions,

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and classes that also exist in that milieu. Beyond this simple allusion, Weill's music further insists upon the diversity of the community by using literary technique to generate a vivid image. Werner Wolf (1999) argues that literature is more capable of creating specific fictional "possible world[s]" that are uniform across different audiences than music is because of the clear direction that words can provide (p. 25). No less, what is at the disposal of musicians and composers are the cultural connotations attached to genres of music that dictate not only emotion, but actual elements of narrative (1999, p. 29). Wolf cites the sonata as an example, which carries with it the assumed narrative of a male and female subject engaging with one another (p. 30). For *Street Scene*, Weill implements the power of cultural connotation to paint specific images by incorporating American jazz and blues into the opera. The song "I Got a Marble and a Star" is written as a standard blues piece, and the character who sings the song, Henry Davis, is almost always cast as Black—this despite any instruction in the script or importance to the narrative. The character's name is not particularly racialized to make one assume that he would be specifically African American; there are no such characters explicitly written into the source text; and the character Henry Davis does not even exist in Rice's play. No less, this role is consistently cast as a Black performer because the song is perceived to be a "Black" one. Weill exploits the social understanding of jazz and blues as part of African American subculture as a means by which to insist that this character is in fact a part of that subculture. While the music cannot literally speak, it still manages to dictate a certain uniform image across its interpreters: specifically, that the opera's casting should encompass a diversity of ethnicities and racial backgrounds that include African Americans.

Weill's musical concoction has an additional effect of emulating plurality in this milieu. The multiple genres not only imply the manifold existent ethnicities, but also demonstrate the interdependence amongst and the fusion within people. Sam's arioso "Lonely House" epitomizes the themes of the play by lamenting his loneliness despite his company (Kowalke, 1995, p. 40). This song likewise demonstrates the community's interconnectedness *within* Sam himself by "blending formal operatic elements with the structure and patterns of American jazz and blues" (Thuleen, 1997). Sam, a working-class bookish Jew working through law school, simultaneously sings: a) an arioso, which is typical of elite European operas; and b) a blues-infusion piece, which is typical of a completely different ethnic culture from his own. A blues arioso stands far apart from Sam's personality or social circumstance, yet is fitting to the realism of the play because the genres match so exactly the emotions being expressed (Thuleen, 1997). The combination of genres is a demonstration not only of the plethora of types of people living together, but also of the influence that such an environment has on a character's individual personality. A key feature of music is its ability to achieve polyphony. Contrarily, literature "would have to be able to present and sustain two or more ideas or narrative strains

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simultaneously—which, by the nature of its medium, it cannot do” (Scher, 1982, p. 233). This dilemma is often tackled by authors through puns that allow for a double-meaning of words or phrases, thus alluding to a double-sound. Rice attempts to tackle this challenge in two ways: first through structure, and second through diegetic sound.

While literature cannot reproduce polyphony in the traditional sense, it can suggest it through “the rapid and systematic switching from one context to another in consecutive (fragments of) phrases” (Wolf, 1999, pp. 20-21). Switching back and forth between different voices and storylines in literature can give the reader the effect that multiple events are occurring simultaneously. In *Street Scene*, the “mosaic of patterns” emerges due to the fragmented snippets of people’s lives, jumping between stories rather quickly and in short spurts (Petrucco, 2001). As a result, “the plot is not linear but pieces of stories that develop over time,” just like in music (Petrucco, 2001). The fragmented and colliding storylines give the reader the impression that multiple events are taking place in different spaces but at the same time. In this regard, Rice has built a sense of polyphony within the structure of his play.

The second manner in which Rice integrates polyphony is through diegetic sound. The play outlines in the beginning that, “throughout the act, and, indeed, throughout the play, there is constant noise The noises are subdued and in the background, but they never wholly cease” (Rice, 1950, p. 114). This description allows Rice to insist that multiple sounds are occurring at once—these street noises plus the dialogue—without actively producing them all throughout the play himself. While the nature, volume, and type of noises are left to the imagination of the reader, this insistence at the beginning of the play urges the reader to be responsible for generating them. For example, just as readers would hold on to the visual descriptions of a story—in this case, the image of the tenement—in order to situate themselves in the fictional world, readers must also hold onto the auditory elements in order to fully understand the setting of the play. Rice’s detailed yet broad description even lends ideas to the types of noises that readers could imagine. By making sound an integral part of the setting, Rice cleverly uses language to produce polyphony in his literature, with the reader as musician.

Weill’s genre choices likewise incorporate polyphony, although in such a way that it represents simultaneity that is more characteristic of literature than of music. Literature often relies on conceptual polyphony, where the concurrent events are two ideas rather than two literal sounds (Wolf, 1999, p. 20). Although words’ clarity stands in stark contrast to music’s ambiguity in definition and meaning, a word can still be ambiguous or have a double meaning, as with puns (Scher, 1982, p. 230); in such cases, a word can adopt multiple interpretations (Wolf, 1999, p. 23). Weill’s music behaves like a pun by obscuring clarity and adopting multiple denotative meanings. “Somehow I Never Could Believe,” for example, is “the most conventional

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aria in the nineteenth century operatic tradition that [Weill] ever wrote," yet "it is full of stretches that are jazz" (Thuleen, 1997). Is it, then, an operatic piece, or a jazz piece? It does not fall into the category of Broadway musical, either. Weill purposely attempts to follow the "line between opera and musical comedy to the point where the line no longer seems to exist" (Sanders, 1980, p. 356). In this way, his music, by exploiting multiple genres, can be interpreted in multiple ways: as an opera, as a Broadway musical, and as blues. This differs from music's traditional form of ambiguity, since the confusion rests not in determining what the narrative of the piece is, but because there *is* more than one apparent narrative. This mirrors the pun, which insists that the reader understand the word or phrase as two equally valid interpretations. Ultimately, all the intermedial decisions that both artists take speak to their greater objective of demonstrating all of the multivariate personalities that coexist in the city.

CONCLUSION

Both the literary and operatic manifestations of *Street Scene* are highly acclaimed works. By reaching across artistic mediums, each version has managed to transcend the limitations of its own medium to convey the powerful and moving themes of alienation, loneliness, and diversity. Both Rice and Weill appreciate the potential that a work of art can have when aurality and text are combined. Rice turned to music to inspire his structure and to infuse musical polyphony into literature. He incorporated the musical quality of repetition into his play and made it central to the oppressive inertia of the tenants. Weill transformed literature into music to create uniform mental images similar to those instigated by words, and reversed Rice's rejection of the narrator role by including arias into his opera. Taken all together, Weill and Rice artistically crafted pieces that are richly complex, unmistakably intermedial, and highly successful at depicting the real lives of the often-overlooked urban dweller.

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