

# American involvement



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Stephen Sondheim, who began his career as a composer and lyricist in 1954 (Sondheim 51) is the greatest composer of the 20th century. His influence on his peers and popular culture separate him from his contemporaries and distinguish him as the preeminent American composer of his time. Sondheim began his career under the tutelage of Oscar Hammering III, father of American musical theatre (PBS). Although originally only a lyricist (providing the lyrics for the songs Hammering wrote), Sondheim was encouraged to try his hand at musical composition as well (Swain 641).

Sondheim's big break, however, came in 1957 when he teamed up with Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurent and Leonard Bernstein to provide lyrics for *West Side Story*. Running nearly 800 performances in its original run, *West Side Story* was a bona fide hit and immediately thrust Sondheim to the front of the American stage (Sondheim 7). Over the course of the next 50 years, Sondheim would compose music and write lyrics for over 20 shows, including *Gypsy*, *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods*.

In that time, he's won more Tony awards than any other Broadway composer (Theatre Wing), received a Pulitzer Prize for *Sunday in the Park with George*, was honored with the Kennedy Center's Lifetime Achievement Award and even an Oscar for Best Song (NP). However, it is not Sondheim's accolades that distinguish him from his peers. Rather, it is the enduring legacy of his work (in the theatre and in popular culture) and the complexity and musicality of his work that mark Sondheim as the greatest American composer of the 20th century.

In order for a composer to be considered important, his or her legacy must extend beyond the musical world. The 20th century saw many important musical figures, but none have had the wide-reaching cultural influence that Stephen Sondheim has. His music and personality have influenced television and movies in a way no other modern Broadway composer's have.

Sondheim's music is often featured on television shows and in movies, even when they may seem out of place. So far is his cultural reach that his name is synonymous with musical theatre, even for the uninitiated.

For example, several of Sondheim's songs have been used on Fox's show Glee. Telling the story of suburban Ohio high school's show choir, Glee has made its name taking songs and creating " mash-ups" the show's latest season was the mishap of " I Feel Pretty" (from Sondheim's West Side Story) and Taylor's " Unprinted. " In fact, Glee utilized at least two other Sondheim songs as well (Entertainment Weekly). Glee is not the only television program to make use of Sondheim's work.

The hit BBC television show Desperate Housewives has used a Sondheim song title or lyric as the episode title for every episode in its seven seasons (BBC). Several songs have even been included in episodes (NP). Will Farrell sang the popular song " Send in the Clowns" from A Little Night Music" when he appeared as a guest on David Letterman. The Fox animated show The Simpsons, long considered arbiters of pop culture relevance (Entertainment Weekly) also " Send in the Clowns" from A Little Night Music when Krusty the Clown's show gets cancelled (Fox).

Crusty, sitting on a stage by himself, sings the song as huge lights spell out his name behind him, a reference to the eleven o'clock number "Rose's Turn" in another Condense musical Gypsy. Shoeshine's music remains relevant not only on television, but on the stage as well. There are currently over 300 productions of Shoeshine's musicals being performed throughout the country (Review). In the past five years, six of his shows have been performed on Broadway (ASS). One, Company was recently performed at Lincoln Center with an all-star cast including Neil Patrick Harris and Stephen Collect (Holder).

The event was so popular that the production is going to be shown in theatres in June (Philharmonic). Shoeshine's continuing importance in popular culture is one of the primary reasons he is the most important and influential composer of the last century. Though many other composers such as Irving Berlin and Leonard Bernstein received the same level of critical success, none has enjoyed the career longevity that Condense has. Neither Berlin nor Bernstein has written songs that even achieved the same level of pop culture relevance that Condense has.

Although Cole Porter may have achieved a similar level of success in the sass (ASS), the fact that his songs are no longer as recognizable as Shoeshine's indicate that Shoeshine's are more important to American culture in the last century. However, in order for a Broadway composer to truly be considered "great," they must do more than provide humbled tunes. They must also provide music that holds merit outside of the context of the musical they're presented in; Shoeshine's songs do just that. His music is far

more complex and original than that of his interpolates, further separating him from the pack.

One of the hallmarks of Shoeshine's music is the use of dissonance (Condense 37). Dissonance, the use of chords that don't sound "right" was, until Condense began experimenting with it, almost unheard of in musical theatre (PBS). It has, however, been used in musical composition for centuries (NP). Shoeshine's use of dissonance illustrated how complex his compositions are; while many composers strive for melodies that are pleasant to the ear, Condense uses composition to further storyline and provide insight into the mood of the scene the music is used in.

For example, in the song "Take a Look, Lee" from Assassins, Condense uses dissonance to create tension leading up to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. While other composers (particularly Cole Porter and Irving Berlin) used music as a break from the action of a show, Condense uses it to further action (Condense 46). And create complexity. In Sweeney Todd, Toby, an orphaned adopted by the title murderer and his mistress Mrs... Love suspects Toddy's murderous ways and sings "Not While I'm Around" to Mrs... Love. The song is sweet and often considered one of Shoeshine's best "love songs" (Condense 152).

However, when the song is later sung by Mrs... Love who is looking to capture and kill Toby, the shift in key creates a far more ominous tone. Here, the same song with the same melody has a very different meaning and mood, thanks to Shoeshine's arrangement. The complexity and immediacy of his music illustrates Shoeshine's genius for not only musical theatre melodies

but also composition as a whole. While other composers may have been as prolific as Condense, none can match his sophistication and complexity.

Condense does not create songs that can work in any musical like Porter or Berlin did (Condense 7).

Rather, each musical is closer to an opera with each song building pony and influencing the next (Condense 8). It is this level of complexity that marks him as the best composer of his generation. Shoeshine's work is also far more realistic than that of his contemporaries. Even when writing about mythological or fantastic elements, he manages to make his characters real; Shoeshine's characters never become caricatures. They are fully formed individuals who act like real people would act in the situations they're placed in. Condense argues that characters should.