

A Waltz in Four? The Manipulation of Accompaniment Schemata in the Identification of Stephen Sondheim's Musical Style

Stephen Sondheim has received much critical and scholarly acclaim as one of the most important composers of American musical theater in the twentieth century. It is therefore fitting to work towards identifying Sondheim's compositional style, which should both root him in the idiom of American musical theater and Romantic musical traditions, and also demonstrate how he is uniquely set apart from his contemporaries and his predecessors. Accompaniment is one of the primary musical parameters in which Sondheim's compositional voice shows through. After rooting Sondheim's use of accompaniment in established musical traditions, I will show how Sondheim alters these patterns to express his own musical voice and ascertain how these elements communicate his distinctive style.

Sondheim suggests that he often begins the compositional process with some kind of accompaniment figure. He describes trying to find the "mood" of a character and scene through the use of musical accompaniment, by combining dramatic concerns with musical implications from speech patterns. These accompaniment figures are often based on a typical pattern, or what Robert Gjerdengen calls a "schema," found in traditional popular or art music.

Accompaniment schemata spawn a number of variations in real music examples. Each accompaniment pattern distinguishes itself from other types through specific musical parameters. In order to properly define any given texture as a particular type of accompaniment, each of the types must be distinguished from each other using what David Huron calls *distinctive features*. Essentially, distinctive features are musical elements that make a particular accompaniment schema unique. By formulating distinctive features of particular schema and then showcasing an example of the schema, one can more thoroughly understand differences in accompaniment patterns. After these schemata have been established, the more difficult to categorize accompaniment patterns that Sondheim uses will be compared to these examples, and the analysis of how he stretches traditional patterns will demonstrate specific aspects of his musical style.

In essence, there are three primary musical parameters that enable the categorization of accompaniment schemata: rhythmic or metric, harmonic, and melodic. The following categories of accompaniment schemata are not unique to Stephen Sondheim. They derive from a rich tradition of musical theater songwriting, which Sondheim was immersed in from his childhood. It is important to show how Sondheim fits into this tradition before demonstrating how he developed his own style that flexes and elaborates upon these accompaniment schemata. While this list is not exhaustive, it represents the primary accompaniment schemata from the Broadway tradition that Sondheim employs.

Category 1: Rhythmic/Metric Types

1a. The Waltz

Distinctive features are a low bass note on the first beat, and beats two and three that are identical and distinctly higher in register than the bass on beat one. A classic example in Broadway is Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Cinderella*, "Ten Minutes Ago," mm. 5–8. In Stephen Sondheim, *Passion*, "Transition (scenes 7–8)," mm. 5–8.

1b. Boom-chick

Distinctive features are a simple duple or quadruple meter with an alternation of registrally distinct strong and weak beats. Also, low bass on a stronger beat, or part of the beat and a registrally distinct treble being on the weaker beat, or part of the beat. A classic example is Cole Porter, *The New Yorkers*, "Take Me Back to Manhattan," mm. 37–40, and in Sondheim, *Follies*, "Live, Laugh, Love," mm. 41–45.

1c. Short-long-short

Distinctive features are the use of a short-long-short, regular rhythmic pattern in either the treble or bass. In common time, the pattern is typically seen as quarter-half-quarter. The vertical chord structure is typically repeated throughout the measure. The classic example comes from Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *South Pacific*, “Cockeyed Optimist,” mm. 69–72. In Sondheim, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, “Love I Hear,” m. 39.

1d. Latin dances

There are a large number of these rhythms or dance types. The distinctive features of the Latin accompaniments have to do primarily with signifiers like a *bossa nova*, *habanera*, *tresillo* or *rhumba* bass line. The treble is typically syncopated against the given meter, often with groupings of three. The classic example is Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, *Me and Juliet*, “No Other Love,” mm. 5–7, and in Sondheim, *Company*, “The Little Things You Do Together,” m. 50.

1e. *Tresillo* (3+3+2)

Found in the fox-trot tradition, The distinctive feature is the 3+3+2 rhythmic grouping pattern. George and Ira Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* provides the classic examples with mm. 23–25 of “Oh Lawd, I’m on My Way.” In Sondheim, *Company*, “The Little Things You Do Together,” mm. 26–27.

Category 2: Harmonic Types

2a. Journeying

Distinctive features are that the treble plays steady, block harmonies on each beat of the measure with the harmonic rhythm at least one measure in length. Typically, each verticality lasts an entire beat, although there are cases in which the beat may be subdivided. The classic examples is Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Showboat*, “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man,” mm. 47–50. In Sondheim, *Into the Woods*, “Act 1 Opening (Part 2),” mm. 27–28.

2b. Release and Neighbor

Distinctive features of these patterns are that they typically have closely spaced chords on every beat of the right hand, but beats three and four involve a resolution-type motion of the first two beats. In the release, a tone or tones of the chord move upward or downward resolving a harmonic dissonance. A classic examples is Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma!*, “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” mm. 11–12.

The neighbor involves the tone or tones moving to a more dissonant chord. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma!*, “Lonely Room,” mm. 7–9 provides the classic examples. In Sondheim, there is a clear Release in *Assassins*, “Opening,” mm. 55–56, and a Neighbor in *Into the Woods*, “Act 1 Opening (Part 2),” mm. 5–6.

2c. Oscillating

Distinctive features are that a note or a chord is established, left, and then returned to. The rhythm of the oscillation is typically quick, and must last at least two measures. Chords are more typical than single notes. A classic examples is in Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim’s, *West Side Story*. “Tonight,” mm. 6–9. In Sondheim, *Sunday in the Park with George*, “Lesson #8,” m. 14a.

2d. Chordal

The distinctive feature is that it is defined by its homophonic texture. All voices in both melody and accompaniment must move together. The classic examples is George and Ira Gershwin, *Strike Up the Band*, “Strike Up the Band,” mm. 5–6. In Sondheim, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, “That’ll Show Him,” mm. 1–2.

Category 3: Melodic Types

3a. Triad Arpeggiation

The distinctive features are a simple triad is broken into a melodic, arpeggiating texture. The specific rhythms and meters of this schema can vary widely. A classic examples is found in Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Carousel*, “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” mm. 8-11. In Sondheim, *Passion*, “Happiness (Part 1),” m. 13.

3b. Extended Tertian Arpeggiation

Distinctive features are an arpeggiation through an extended tertian chord (7th, 9th, 11th, or 13th) or quartal sonority rather than a simple triad. A classic example is Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, *Jumbo*, “My Romance,” mm. 7–10. In Sondheim, *Sunday in the Park with George*, “Putting it Together (Part XI),” mm. 1a–3.

Although Sondheim’s use of accompaniment has its origins in traditional musical theater accompaniment schemata, Sondheim manipulates these schemata to further develop his personal style. Besides some of the smaller ways in which he alters these familiar patterns, particular ways in which he makes accompaniments his own are through the use of developing accompaniment, the waltz in 4 and emerging meter.

Developing Accompaniment

Good Broadway composers and orchestrators provide variety within the basic song forms to create interest. Musical elements from rhythm to harmony might undergo variation for contrast in repeated sections. Sondheim takes this notion a step further in what will be called *developing accompaniment*. In developing accompaniment, Sondheim gradually increases the texture of the accompaniment patterns within songs throughout his body of work. Since developing accompaniment is rare throughout musical theater literature, it becomes that much more a distinctive feature of Sondheim’s compositional voice.

Arnold Schoenberg provides precedence for developing accompaniment with his concept of developing variation. Schoenberg’s definition takes into account character, mood, and expression, all of which are pivotal to music for the theater.

Sondheim’s song “It’s Hot Up Here” is an extensive example of how developing accompaniment is used to convey drama in the opening of the second act of *Sunday in the Park with George*. The dramatic backdrop consists of the subjects of Georges Seurat’s painting, *Un dimanche d’été a l’Île de la Grande Jatte*, complaining about being stuck in the heat, with the same people, in an unchanging position for all eternity.

The song develops the dramatic context with the music. In the beginning the characters begin one by one to complain about being stuck forever in a painting. As the song progresses, the characters get more agitated and the accompaniment matches the growing angst.

This song employs a blending of accompaniment schemata and textures. The number begins with what appears to be a waltz schema in mm. 1–2. There is a beat one bass followed by a beat two chord that is registrally distinct. Because of the *rubato* tempo and fermatas over rests at the end of the measure, there is no indication from hearing this accompaniment of what the meter will be. This helps to introduce the situation and the characters one at a time, with a sense of *rubato* allowing for the song to build in musical and dramatic tension.

A more regular tempo is established in the next section of the song at m. 15. The written and perceived meters are both in three. This strengthens the argument for retroactively hearing mm. 1-2 in three. However, the sense of waltz schema is underdetermined, since there is a treble chord on beat one and additional, syncopated bass notes. The treble resembles more of a journeying schema at this point. The development of m. 15 first occurs in m. 22, and is exemplified in m. 23. The treble chord texture thickens, and the bass becomes more active. A further thickening of the treble chord occurs in m. 30, creating even greater musical and dramatic tension through this development.

The opening material returns in mm. 32–33, with its own sense of variation. It begins with the waltz's distinctive features reversed since the treble chord occurs before the bass. This is quickly corrected in m. 33, where the next development occurs in the form of the bass sixteenth-eighth figure at the end of beat four. With no *rubato* and a homorhythmic doubling of the melody in the bass occurring on beat four, the waltz schema is weakened for this section.

While mm. 32–33 stretched the sense of waltz to four beats, m. 43 condenses it to two beats to end the section. A repeated, condensed waltz in two—in common time—shares the distinctive features of a low bass on beats one and three with a registrally distinct chord on beats two and four. It is as though beat three of the typical waltz schema is chopped off. A reasonable argument is that this is simply a boom-chick schema at this point. It meets most of the distinctive features of this pattern. However, it is more likely to be heard as a condensed waltz because of the metrical context, and because the beat one bass is exactly repeated on beat three, instead of being a different bass note a perfect fifth away. It would take more iterations than a single measure at the end of a formal section to make it feel like a boom-chick accompaniment, especially since the section is in 3/4 time. The section returns at m. 44, with the regular three pattern, although the bass becomes more irregular. This continues with a thickening of treble texture into mm. 48–49. The bass is elaborated upon, in various guises of irregularity, until the more regular m. 75.

Elements of the A section are retained at m. 85. The low bass on beat one produces an expectation for the waltz pattern to recur. Beats two and three are the only treble beats to receive chords on the beat, furthering the ambiguity as to whether this is extended waltz territory. However, now both the treble and bass textures have become much more lively, especially after beat three, deconstructing almost any sense of a waltz.

At m. 94, the song's accompaniment culminates into its most complete form. Every beat in the treble, and all except the weak beat two in the bass are played. This establishes a pattern of strong-weak-strong-weak, becoming a secure four. The four-pattern does not have the final say, however, since a three-pattern re-establishes itself through a journeying accompaniment in m. 112. This song provides a notable example among the many instances of Sondheim's use of developing accompaniment.

The Waltz in Four

Throughout his body of work, there are numerous instances of where Sondheim keeps the listener guessing by varying familiar musical patterns – particularly metrical deformations in accompaniment schemata.

It may seem that a distinctive feature of the waltz must be that it is in triple meter. Waltzes are traditionally in triple meter, since that is how they are danced. However, if we consider the primary distinctive features of the waltz – being a beat one bass note that is followed by registrally distinct chords – apart from any metric constraint, we find instances where Sondheim stretches the metric blueprint to allow for what will here be called the “waltz in four.” The idea of the waltz in four is that the music still sounds like a waltz; however, either the second or third beat holds longer than expected. This gives the sense of metrical extension like a *ritardando* or *Luftpause* in the phrase, although it is very specifically notated. A waltz in four still contains the distinctive features of a strong, accented bass, and registrally distinct, metrically weaker upper voices contained in the waltz in three.

One way to invoke a waltz in four is to stretch a waltz in three through the use of different meters. The B section of “The Worst Pies in London,” from *Sweeney Todd*, mm. 13–24 is a prime example. In mm. 15 and 18, the bass clef has a clear sense of waltz in three, meeting the distinctive features of a low bass on beat one and registrally distinct upper voice on beats two and three. However, leading into these measures are measures of 4/4 and 5/4. These measures do contain the necessary features of the waltz, with the low bass on beat one and the weak beats three and four. However, these weak beats are extended another beat or two. Hypermetrically, these beats, and even the entirety of mm. 14 and 17 feel like an anacrusis to the regular 3/4 waltz sections.

This establishes a context for the “regular” waltz in four. “Being Alive” from *Company*, mm. 22–23, is an exemplar for the waltz in four schema. The downbeat open fifth and octave followed by the registrally distinct treble on beat two are two obvious distinctive features of the waltz, which are being hung on a four-beat framework. A motive of five eighth notes extends the phrase, but through the use of a repeated B♭ and A♭ there is a sense that the end of the phrase is slowly falling away, like a glacial calving. They give way to the low B♭, which then feels like an anacrusis to the next measure, all in a long, extended-beat limbo.

The only difference at mm. 48–49 is that beat three enters in the treble. It is a half note, so the measure could be heard as an extended beat three limbo. However, this beat calls for a *tenuto* after the staccato beat two, slightly undermining the sense of waltz. As the accompaniment develops, mm. 60–61 undermine the waltz even further, with the entrance of a treble beat four. At m. 109, the song “reverts” back to the same sequence of events as m. 22, with a thicker and wider texture. This helps to regain the sense of waltz in four. The idea of stretching the waltz schema to a four-beat framework is an unusual occurrence in Broadway musicals, and certainly distinguishes Sondheim’s stylistic voice. However, precedence can be found in the works of late Romantic composers such as Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev.

2. Emerging Meter

At times, Sondheim begins with what seems to be one type of accompaniment, but eventually it transforms into, or reveals itself to have always been, another type. This is especially true when dealing with metrically over- or underdetermined surfaces in accompaniment patterns. Gretchen Horlacher’s work on emerging meter in the music of Steve Reich demonstrates how an ametrical piece of music might attain a sense of metrical hierarchy, and perhaps even lose it again. Some of Sondheim’s songs project similar phenomena.

In “Pirelli’s Miracle Elixir” from *Sweeney Todd*, the accompaniment begins with a low bass on beat one followed by registrally distinct upper voice on beat two. These are two distinctive features of the waltz. When looking at the score, it is clear that this piece is written in compound quadruple meter, which may indicate that this might become a waltz in four. Nothing is heard on the third beat, and when listening to the music, it is clear that there is more space than just the third beat as well. It is possible to hear this as a fermata on the rest; especially considering that there is nothing happening on beats three or four. The surface of the music is underdetermined in m. 37.

In m. 39, a new event occurs with the bass B♭ on beat four. This starts the process of an emerging quadruple feeling out of the uncertainty as to whether the beginning of this piece might be a waltz or boom-chick accompaniment. More material is added to beats three and four in the treble at m. 45, helping to further solidify a four-beat measure.

Eventually, a third beat does emerge at m. 57, exactly replicating the chord from beat two, which may then bring the listener back to thinking this is a waltz. However, as the music progresses, eventually a fourth beat emerges that exactly replicates beats two and three in m. 58. This might allude to a waltz in four, but because of the regularity of the fourth beat, a quadruple pattern asserts itself. The pattern is not complete yet; in m. 59 the repeated chord arrives on beat one as well, taking away any sense of waltz by eliminating the needed distance between bass and treble voices on beat one. The quadruple meter pattern has emerged at this point, but is not in its finished form. The bass adds a repeated beat one note on beat three, giving the sense of strong-weak-(strong)-weak in a four pattern. The journeying schema becomes a march-like neighbor schema at m. 67.

After the meter has shown itself to be a regular four pattern, Sondheim continues to develop it. The bass line becomes more lively as the number progresses, with a dominant anacrusis to each strong beat, changing the character of the accompaniment ever so slightly, as seen in m. 72. At m. 89, the bass begins to take an arpeggiated, *habanera* type of motion, changing the character even more.

Now that the meter has been solidified as quadruple, the meter changes again at m. 142 to 2/4 and resumes the registrally distinct beats one and two that are indicative of either the waltz or boom-chick schema. The bass line’s move to dominant strengthens the case for boom-chick, but the repeated treble chord is missing. The accompaniment in m. 142 is further developed in m. 150, but does little to solidify the boom-chick. As the tempo quickens, and the musico-dramatic intensity heightens as the crowd is informed that they have been duped, the accompaniment changes once more to a solid, even 2/4 arpeggiated pattern in the bass with running sixteenths in the treble in m. 160.

“Pirelli’s Miracle Elixir” traverses through a developing accompanimental process where several meters emerge throughout the song. This use of emergent meter shows how Sondheim uses accompaniment to increase musico-dramatic intensity and is another way in which he showcases his musical voice.

Accompaniments affect the sound of Sondheim’s music so intrinsically because they are surface-level musical events. For the listener, melody is probably at the top of the attention range, but accompaniment could well be next. On an early hearing of his musicals, one will likely hear accompaniment patterns that

repeat themselves. A theater composer is likely to reuse schemata that are familiar and comfortable. What sets Sondheim's use of these schemata apart is his particular use of meter, rhythm, textures and harmonies.

Sondheim uses a variety of traditional Broadway accompaniment schemata, but also stretches these patterns to distinguish his compositional voice from other composers of musical theater. Although categorization and identification of these accompaniment types is useful in seeing the schemata that Sondheim prefers, this alone does not give us a complete picture of Sondheim's style. Besides the distinctly Sondheim types discussed in this chapter, very few of the stock patterns he uses are likely to have never been used before or since by another composer. It is only by identifying other musical parameters within these types that a more extensive theory of his style can be identified.

Santrauka

Valsas iš keturių? Manipuliacija akompanimento schemomis S. Sondheim'o muzikiniame stiliuje

Pranešime demonstruojama, kad akompanimento schemas (terminas paimtas iš R. Gjerdingeno „Music in the Galant Style“ (*Galantiškojo stiliaus muzika*)) yra pagrindiniai faktoriai, lemiantys Sondheim'o muzikinį stilių. Skirtingai nuo kitų Amerikos muzikinio teatro atstovų, kurie tradiciškai laikosi požiūrio, kad svarbiausia yra melodija, Sondheimas komponavimo procesą dažnai pradeda nuo akompanimento figūracijų, kurios jo miuziklams ir suteikia muzikinį dramatinį kontekstą.

Šiomis figūracijomis kompozitorius modeliuoja personažus arba situacijas miuzikluose, pagrįstuose tipiškomis amerikietiško muzikinio teatro idiomomis: ritminėmis ir metrinėmis (valsas, „bumčikas“, trumpa-ilga–trumpa, Lotynų Amerikos šokiai, triolės kartu su duolėmis), harmoninėmis (moduliuojanti, jungiamoji, nepastovi, akordinė) ir melodinėmis (trigarsių arpedžiovimas ir išplėstinis tercijų arpedžiovimas). Pranešime suklasifikuotos XX a. Brodvėjaus miuzikluose naudotos akompanimento rūšys.

Iš savo pirmtakų ir amžininkų Sondheimas išsiskiria tuo, kad šias tradicines schemas jis modifikuoja daug ryškiau ir šiuolaikiškiau. Jis išplečia tradicinį trijų metro dalių valsą ir sukuria tai, ką mes vadiname „valu iš keturių“. Čia jis išskirtinius valso bruožus (ir tai, kad pirma takto dalis yra bosa, o kitos dvi – akordai aukštesniame registre) formuoja keturiuose takto dalyse ir taip suteikia muzikai neapibrėžtumo trečioje ir ketvirtoje takto dalyse bei išplečia klausytojo muzikinio laiko pojūtį, nes šis nesuvokia, ar tai yra *rubato* trijų dalių metre, ar fermatos, ar valso bruožų turintis keturių dalių metras. Norėdamas viename numeryje lėtai pakeisti muzikinius schemas aspektus arba vieną schemą pakeisti kita, Sondheimas naudoja „išplėtotą akompanimentą“, kurią pagal A. Schönbergo pavyzdį. Tai matome miuziklo „Sunday in the Park with George“ (*Sekmadienis su Džordžu parke*) numeryje „It's Hot in Here“ (*Čia karšta*), kur akompanimentas iš dviejų paprastų valso akordų išplėtojamas į sudėtingą faktūrą su kontrapunktinėmis linijomis ir keliais schemų pakeitimais.

Demonstruodamas, kaip Sondheimas kuria metro ir akompanimento nevienareikšmiškumą, naudojuosi G. Horlacher pastaba apie „metro formavimąsi“. Miuziklo „Svynis Todas“ numeryje „Stebuklingas Pirelio eliksyras“ matome, kaip iš pradžių atsirandantis neaiškus metras tarsi svyruoja tarp galimybės virsti trijų arba keturių dalių metru. Numeriui įgaunant pagreitį pridedama arba nuimama ritminių elementų, ir dėl to metro pojūtis tai atsiranda, tai vėl išnyksta, pakeičiamos kelios metro rūšys, kol galiausiai apsisistojama prie vieno, sėkmingai įsivyraujančio pabaigoje. Šie procesai Sondheim'o kūryboje tampa idiomatiški ir suteikia kompozitoriui savitą muzikinį braižą, kuris, nors ir pagrįstas amerikietiško muzikinio teatro tradicijomis, pasižymi kompozicine drąsa.