

Round in Circles We Go: A study of leitmotifs in selected musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Stephen Sondheim, and Adam Guettel

Author: Kathryn Witkowski, BM, Vocal Performance | Advisor: Dr. Amanda Pabyan, School of Music

INTRODUCTION

The idea of a leitmotif was made most famous by German Opera composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883), and in German means “leading motive”. Britannica defines this as “a reoccurring musical theme appearing usually in operas but also in symphonic poems. It is used to reinforce the dramatic action, to provide physiological insight into the characters, and to recall or suggest the listener extramusical ideas relevant to a dramatic event.” (Brittanica, *Leitmotif*)

In Matthew Bribitzer-Shull’s book “Understanding the Leitmotif”, he defines the leitmotif using a collection of previous definitions and is broken up into three components is as follows:

1. Leitmotifs are bifurcated in nature, comprising both a musical physiognomy and an emotional association.
2. Leitmotifs are developmental in nature, evolving to reflect and create new musico-dramatic contexts.
3. Leitmotifs contribute to and function within a larger musical structure. (Bribitzer-Stull, Matthew, *Understanding the Leitmotif*)

METHODOLOGY

These shows were selected due to the presence of leitmotifs, which is tied to the creation of an integrated musical and due to the operatic nature of these shows. All have soaring vocal lines, are sung in a legit or classical style, and use musical elements similar to opera, such as leitmotifs, large orchestration, and their unified museo-dramatic scores. I was able to identify the leitmotifs using prior research as well as using Matthew Bribitzer-Stull’s definition of leitmotifs, listed in the above paragraph. Each of these musicals has original cast recordings available, as well as the original scores. The fact that these are the original published works from these composers is important since a setback to musical theatre analysis is the fact that shows can be changed, updated, reorchestrated, and even have songs cut from production to production. Additionally, I focused on the main three or four leitmotifs within these shows for time purposes.

RELATED LITERATURE

Blustein, Nathan Beary. “Through Arrangements of Shadows: Experiences of Reprise in Stephen Sondheim’s Leitmotivic Musicals”. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2020.
Bribitzer-Stull, Matthew. Understanding the Leitmotif: from Wagner to Hollywood Film Music. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
“Leitmotif.” Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, 2020.
Rishoi, Niel. “Carousel, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Operatic Musical.” The Opera quarterly 18, no. 4 (2002): 534–554.

FINDINGS

These composers all make use of leitmotifs in a similar way to their compositional style. Rodgers and Hammerstein used this technique to further their idea of an integrated musical, with the book and music being directly tied in with one another. Leitmotifs helped to make this connection, specifically in the underscoring of Carousel. Sondheim used leitmotifs in order to draw familiarity from the audience, something important to his idea of a concept musical, which sometimes did not have a plot or clear time-line. Finally, Guettel uses leitmotifs to create a tonal world connected to an idea, such as chords or elongated rhythmic idea, as well as using a melodic and lyric lines

APPLICATION

A challenge faced by musical theatre actors is how to discover what the character’s subtext or motivation is and what the character’s frame of mind is. Leitmotifs offer an answer due to their representative nature. From an example of my findings shown in the next block, I look at Sondheim’s Passion and the leitmotifs within that show. As described by the findings, an actor, director, or music director can show that Giorgio’s character has begun to have feelings for Fosca earlier than he may have realized as she slowly invades his life. Not only are these findings important to actors, but they are especially important to music directors directing these musicals. A music director must have an analysis of the show in order to have a good understanding of how to teach and conduct it. These findings could be turned into a music director’s guide to the shows studied, and can be expounded on in more depth in further research.

CONCLUSION

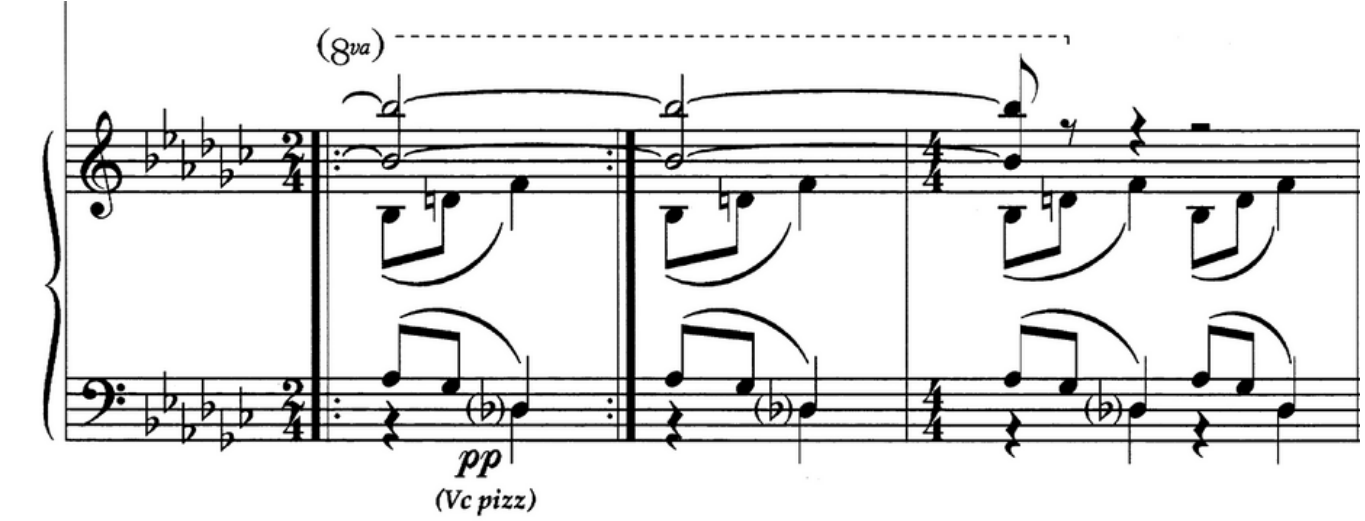
Composers Rodgers and Hammerstein, Stephen Sondheim, and Adam Guettel all have unique uses for the compositional technique of the leitmotif. Rodgers and Hammerstein pioneered the usage in musical theatre, while Sondheim and Guettel reinvented it in their own ways to work with their compositional style and the style of the shows they wrote. This information is essential to music directors and should be further researched in the future.

ABSTRACT

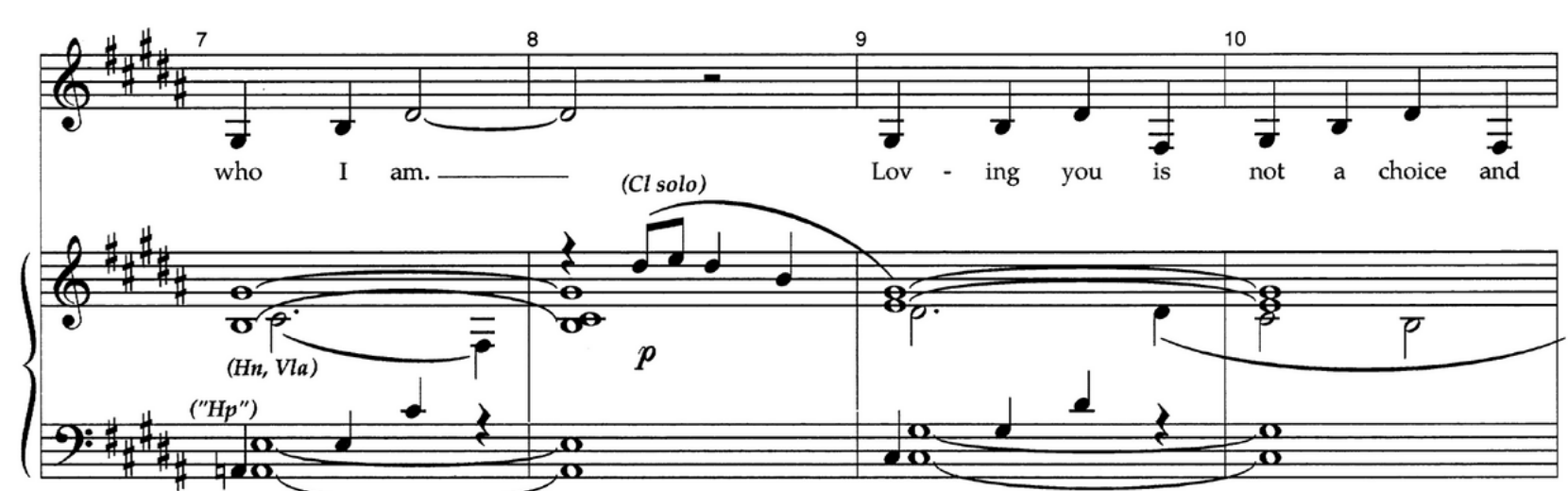
This research highlights and s the usage of a musical device called a leitmotif in the music of three musical theatre composers and selected shows, Carousel by Rodgers and Hammerstein, Into the Woods and Passion by Sondheim, and A Light in the Piazza and Floyd Collins by Guettel. These works bare a resemblance to operas, with large orchestrations, limited speaking lines, and highly classical levels of singing, and specifically the usage of leitmotifs. It examines the similarities and differences from these composers and shows application of the musical device, and defines a select few leitmotifs in each show which is showcased by songs.

LEITMOTIF EXAMPLE, *PASSION*

Passion opens with “Happiness”, which includes a piano line that vamps an ascending major triad in the right hand against a descending line, which is characterized by a descending major 2nd followed by a perfect fourth.



This ascending triad in the right-hand makes another appearance in the show, later when he finds that Fosca has followed him onto the train, where she tells him how she loves him. In this piece, “Loving You”, Fosca’s line is nearly exclusively ascending triads, but in minor.



While this leitmotif could be brushed off as any other triad, in Sondheim’s writing in Passion there are no other triads present in the rest of this show, aside from ones identified and backed up with evidence as this leitmotif. During the song “Happiness”, we see Giorgio and Clara having an intimate moment in their relationship while sharing their love for one another. This accompaniment of an ascending major triad takes place in each of the four letter songs, which are the love letters between Clara and Giorgio. This triad in the accompaniment of “Happiness”, and the letter songs, could represent the love Giorgio is receiving, which changes slightly from Clara to Fosca. Clara (stemming from the word *chiaro* in Italian, meaning light) and her love for him being in major, while Fosca (stemming from the Latin word *fuscus* meaning gloomy, dark, cavernous) and her love for him being in minor in “Loving You”. This is both representative, emotionally, and literally, as well as transformative between both songs. This leitmotif also makes an appearance in the song “Is This What You Call Love” from mm 3-7. The treble clef again has an ascending minor triad, while Giorgio is singing of his frustration with the love Fosca is giving him, which he does not replicate at the time. One could even argue that in “No One Has Ever Loved Me”, when Giorgio sings a now descending minor triad, he is mirroring the leitmotif of Fosca’s love in his lyrical line, as well as in his life.

