

Notes on the Program

By Steven Blier

There are songs about war, and food, and travel, and politics. But let's face it: the vast majority of songs are about love. The pains and joys of our hearts are so complex that they seem to require the magic symbiosis of melody and poetry. Classical concertgoers can find balm for their troubled souls in their favorite art song composers; I have tended to gravitate to Fauré, the master of evanescent attraction, and Brahms, the oracle of the rejected lover, the guru of the loser. But Fauré and Brahms are understandably mute on the dilemmas of twenty-first century lovers: bad dates, unexpectedly exotic sexual predilections, fringy obsessions, partners who leave hairballs in the sink. To address these contemporary issues we offer *A Modern Person's Guide to Hooking Up and Breaking Up*, an updated and distilled edition of a series of programs about the battle of the sexes that I've worked on since 2004.

Our *Modern Person's Guide* has plenty of angst—after all, tortured lovers usually sing the most interesting songs. But we also have room for more innocent souls, especially in our opening chapters. Frank Loesser's "Standing on the Corner" comes from his 1956 masterpiece *The Most Happy Fella*. In those palmy days, a Broadway song could top the charts, and this fresh-faced exploration of masculine desire was a Billboard hit for both the Four Tops and Dean Martin. While Frank Loesser's hangdog male quartet doesn't seem to be getting much action, the young woman in Irving Berlin's 1919 "You'd Be Surprised" has hit pay dirt: a nerdy guy with an unsuspected command of sexual technique. At the age of five, Berlin left his native Russia and immigrated to this country where he quickly absorbed the nuances of American vernacular speech; this allowed him to write something as suggestive as "You'd Be Surprised" while keeping a G rating in the early years of the jazz age. The song has been revived during almost every decade, with famous renditions by Eddie Cantor, Marilyn Monroe, Madeline Kahn, Idina Menzel, and the rock band White Hassle. And certainly it was the inspiration for Sondheim's 1971 tune "Can That Boy F-f-f-f-foxtrot," which explores and updates the identical comic principle.

George Gershwin's music seems to teeter deliciously between innocence and experience, desire and fulfillment. His early songs are imbued with a unique freshness—the wonder of a boy who is just becoming a man. "Innocent Ingenue Baby," a song Gershwin co-wrote in 1923 with his close friend and advisor William Daly, evokes this beautifully precarious moment. The singer has fallen into the clutches of a teenage temptress who clearly knows her way around boys. Gershwin illustrates his plight with one of his trademark pentatonic melodies, using only the black keys of the piano, evoking a young guy who is half prey, half predator.

Hyperawareness and blissful obliviousness each have their proper place in relationships, but they can also lead to problems. The singer in "We Can Talk to Each Other" is a supremely insensitive guy, prone to logorrhea; the man in "He Never Did That Before" is more attuned to nuance, which only leads him to a sleepless post-coital night. The first of these is by the songwriting team of lyricist Richard Maltby, Jr. and composer David Shire. They met each other when they were students at Yale in the late 1950s, and spent a few decades creating a repertoire of smart, sharp cabaret songs. In 1977 this material was finally gathered into a revue called *Starting Here, Starting Now*, and I was so bewitched by the show that I went to see it three times. Many New Yorkers first knew of Maltby as the creator of the famously difficult crossword puzzles in *New York Magazine*. He went on to win awards for directing the wildly successful Broadway revues *Ain't Misbehavin'* (1978) and *Fosse* (1996). David Shire is a denizen of Los Angeles, where he has written sound tracks for many television shows and movies, including *The Conversation*, *All the President's Men*, and *Saturday Night Fever*. Maltby and Shire also created a couple of Broadway musicals, *Baby* (1983) and *Big* (1996).

"He Never Did That Before" comes from a 2005 theater piece called *Songs from an Unmade Bed*, comprised of works by eighteen composers all with lyrics by Mark Campbell. Campbell is an expert at condensing complex human riddles into perfect rhymed couplets. He is also able to write about sex with frankness, humor, and truthfulness. *Unmade Bed* is part song cycle and part one-man vaudeville revue, chronicling the experiences of a gay man living in today's New York City. We've featured songs from this show in recent concerts—"Exit Right," "I Miss New York," and "The Night You Decided to Stay." In "He Never Did That Before," blissful afterglow turns into baleful anxiety attack, leavened by the irresistible rhythm of Debra Barsha's R&B groove. Barsha is a quintuple threat: actress, lyricist, singer, composer, and pianist: a virtuosic partner to match Mark Campbell's razor-sharp wit.

The easiest way to avoid these sorts of relationship snafus is simply to take oneself off the market for a season. This is the idea of Stephen Sondheim's bewitching "The Girls of Summer," the title song for a 1956 play by N. Richard Nash for which Sondheim provided incidental music. This was Sondheim's first Broadway outing, and he set the bar very high; the composer set out to write a "Lena Horne song," and he certainly captured her vocal swing and feline coolness with this luscious piece.

There was no way we could leave Cole Porter, the bad boy of American popular song, out of our guide to hooking up and breaking up. His entire oeuvre is devoted to that very subject, and there is no one who can describe liaisons, from the wholesome to the down-low, with more elegance and subversive humor. "You're a Bad Influence on Me" was written for his 1936 hit show *Red, Hot, and Blue*. It starred Ethel Merman, Jimmy Durante, and Bob Hope, with a plotline straight out of screwball comedy. Merman played a retired manicurist who had come into money, Durante was her ex-con assistant, and Hope a lawyer who had lost the love of his life at age six when he accidentally branded his inamorata's rear end with a hot waffle iron. Not exactly *Hamlet*, but apparently a good enough plot on which to hang some of Porter's best songs—

"It's De-Lovely," "Ridin' High," and "Down in the Depths." "You're a Bad Influence on Me" was cut soon after the opening night, replaced by a song called "The Ozarks are Calling Me Home." Merman probably wanted something brassier to sing towards the end of the second act. But "Bad Influence" is quintessential Porter: a song in praise of forbidden fruit, the libido activated against its owner's better judgment.

These days we are able to talk about sexual variations far more openly than in Cole Porter's time. In the spirit of Alfred Kinsey, we are delving into the great underbelly of dating—the kinks and indiscretions that were discreetly passed over in the popular songs of my youth, when love was still a many-splendored thing. "Through the Wall," for example, takes us into the wonderful world of voyeurism. It was written by Gunnar Madsen and Richard Greene, members of the San Francisco a cappella singing group called The Bobs. Celebrated for their imaginative arrangements of well-known songs and their off-the-wall original material, The Bobs achieved cult status in the 1980s and 90s. They were brilliant singers, charismatic performers, and crackerjack musicians. "Through the Wall" dates from their debut album in 1983. I see it as an unhinged post-modern version of "The Girl Next Door."

Love can be a real pain, and for some people that's just the way they like it. Such is the comic premise of Tom Lehrer's "The Masochism Tango," which comes from his second LP, *An Evening Wasted With Tom Lehrer* (1959). Lehrer was a math student at Harvard with a wicked gift for satire. He became known around Cambridge for his party pieces and was persuaded to issue an LP in 1953. His intelligence and comic timing launched a brilliant side career as an entertainer. Many of his songs have gone on to become classics: "The Vatican Rag," "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park," and "I Hold Your Hand in Mine." Lehrer entered the national spotlight when he wrote songs for the hit TV show *That Was the Week that Was*. But he retired as a performer in the early 1970s, settling down to teach both mathematics and musical theater at the University of California in Santa Cruz.

Adding a third person into a relationship spices up some marriages and poisons others. In the interest of fairness, we're dramatizing both outcomes. "C'est la vie" shows us the best possible scenario: a madcap trio in Paris happily rolling around in bed together. The song comes from the 1934 musical revue *Life Begins at 8:40*, with music by Harold Arlen and lyrics by Ira Gershwin and Yip Harburg. At that time Arlen was a relative newcomer to the scene, making his mark writing songs for The Cotton Club. In the summer of 1934, Harburg had just had a falling out with the bridge-burning Vernon Duke, who had a bad habit of quarreling with his collaborators. Harburg had already written a song with Arlen, the iconic "It's Only a Paper Moon," and wanted to continue the partnership. When Harburg offered Arlen *Life Begins at 8:40*, he jumped at the opportunity to enter the mainstream. The Cotton Club was popular, but Broadway was the big time. To write additional lyrics and sketches, they brought in Ira Gershwin who had time on his hands while his brother George was busy composing *Porgy and Bess*. The show was a tremendous success, and has just received a spiffy premiere recording on PS Classics.

Arlen and Gershwin wring naughty laughs from a peccadillo between consenting adults, but Jason Robert Brown plumbs the darker side of infidelity in his autobiographical 2001 musical *The Last Five Years*. Based on his failed marriage to Theresa O'Neill, Brown chronicles the struggles of an ambitious Jewish writer, Jamie Wellerstein, and his beautiful Gentile wife, Cathy Hyatt (celebrated in one of Jamie's early songs, "Shiksa Goddess"). Jamie has become an overnight celebrity, while Cathy is having little success launching her career as an actress. The show uses a brilliant theatrical device: Jamie's success story is told in chronological order, while Cathy's sad tale starts at the end and moves backwards to the beginning. The only place their stories intersect is at their wedding, the midpoint of the musical. "Nobody Needs to Know" finds Jamie in the throes of an extramarital affair. As he prepares to join his wife for a weekend in Ohio, where she has finally landed a dismal summer stock gig, he goes through a wide range of emotions, from self-recrimination to anger. At his best, Brown is a master of words and music. This piece, torn straight from his own life, finds the songwriter at his peak.

I was tickled to see that lyricist Lynne Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty have found their fictional counterparts in this season's TV show *Smash*, where Debra Messing and Christian Borle enact a successful Broadway songwriting team uncannily evocative of these real-life collaborators. Ahrens and Flaherty have enjoyed a number of successes on the Great White Way, including *Once on This Island*, *Ragtime*, and *Suessical*. "Times Like This" comes from their very first musical, a farcical romp called *Lucky Stiff* that premiered at Playwrights Horizons in 1988. Its initial run was brief—only fifteen performances—but the show garnered both the Richard Rodgers Award that year and later the Helen Hayes Award for Best Musical when it was revived at the Olney Theater in Maryland. The show was recorded in 1994, preserving the performance of NYFOS favorite Mary Testa in the role of Rita, a legally blind jewel embezzler who has accidentally murdered her boyfriend. *Lucky Stiff's* farce runs high, but the song that has entered the canon is "Times Like This," a plaintive wish for tenderness and fidelity.

In love, as in everything else, the one person you can always count on is...yourself. Ed Kleban supplies us with a hymn to sexual self-reliance, "Do It Yourself." Everyone knows Kleban's work, even if they don't know his name—he wrote the lyrics for the 1975 blockbuster *A Chorus Line*. Kleban had a number of other musicals in the pipeline but they never came to fruition; he was a complex man who battled with many personal demons, and when he died in 1987 at age 48 he left behind an array of excellent songs and unfinished projects. One of them was a musical called *Warhol*, for which "Do It Yourself" was written. I first heard this song at a benefit for the fledgling Manhattan Theater Club in 1974 when the now-venerable MTC had just finished its second season. Bob Balaban (of *Waiting for Guffman* fame) was the lead singer, with Kleban and Richard Maltby, Jr. filling in as backup chorus. I waited 33 years to get a copy of the song; Ed had always

promised to send me one but fate intervened. I am grateful to his friend Linda Kline, who finally gave me the music for a piece that has haunted my memory for over three decades.

Most people long to be in a relationship. But the reality of living with another flawed human being can be a far cry from the Hallmark Greeting Card paradigm. Noël Coward peers behind the veneer of a sweet old married couple in “Bronxville Darby and Joan,” which comes from the London production of his musical *Sail Away* (1962). Darby and Joan, English archetypes of devoted, elderly spouses, first appeared in Henry Sampson Woodfall’s 1735 poem “The Joys of Love Never Forgot”:

*Old Darby, with Joan by his side
You’ve often regarded with wonder.
He’s dropsical, she is sore-eyed
Yet they’re ever uneasy asunder.*

Coward blows the stereotype to smithereens with his patented brand of acid humor. He recently took a critical drubbing in Stephen Sondheim’s book *Finishing the Hat*; Sondheim lambasted The Master for sentimentality in his ballads and nastiness in his comedy. I grant Sondheim his point about Coward’s love songs, which can seem stilted and Edwardian (“I’ll leave you never, love you forever, all our past sorrows redeeming”). But many of Coward’s comic songs still hit their mark brilliantly: “Alice Is At It Again,” “Don’t Put Your Daughter on the Stage, Mrs. Worthington,” “I’ve Been to a Marvelous Party,” and of course tonight’s offering.

People have widely different standards of hygiene, and a “hot guy” can quickly morph into a “hot mess” when you have to share a bathroom and a kitchen with him. This is the dilemma dramatized in another song by The Bobs, “Trash,” which also comes from their 1983 debut album. Motown meets church hymn in this new-wave virtuoso piece, fueled as always by The Bobs’s trademark intelligence and wry ill-temper.

I have always been fascinated by the American pop standard “When I Fall in Love” by Victor Young (“Sweet Sue”) and Edward Heyman (“Body and Soul”). Under the guise of a straightforward love ballad, it poses a strange conundrum. In Heyman’s lyric, the singer states his intention to give himself fully to someone he has identified as his lover...and yet he seems to be waiting for something to materialize that would put all the pieces together: “the moment I can feel that you feel that way too/Is when I’ll fall in love with you.” Victor Young’s upwardly arching melody, filled with unusually wide intervals, also seems to be reaching towards some catalyst or resolution. I can’t claim that Young and Heyman were aiming at such complexities when they wrote this song for the 1952 movie *One Minute to Zero*, but the combination of passionate certitude and passive withholding gives this song a Sondheimesque twist: “I’ll fall for you completely—sometime in the future.”

As I mentioned earlier, I am now a veteran of four previous programs on the subject of courtship rituals and relationship snafus. But I must admit that songs about marriage started to look very different to me on June 24, 2011, the day same-sex marriage became legal in New York State. (Thank you, Andrew Cuomo.) Two hours after the legislation was announced, I was engaged. With my own nuptials looming, my irreverent look at mating rituals took on new meanings.

The song that seemed the most different, of course, was our finale: Sondheim’s “Marry Me a Little,” originally intended for his 1970 musical *Company*. The elusive, womanizing hero, Bobby, was supposed to sing this piece midway through Act II as he proposed to the equally commitment-averse Amy (the girl who melts down on her wedding day and sings “Getting Married Today”). Before he finished the song, Sondheim realized that if Bobby could be this articulate about his conflicts, there would be nothing left for his character to discover for the rest of the musical. Ever a practical man of the theater, he abandoned “Marry Me a Little,” but eventually finished it as a favor to a friend. Later productions of *Company* restored the song, but every time I hear it in the show I come to the very same conclusion as the composer: it puts a full stop on Bobby’s story 40 minutes before the Act II curtain. Nevertheless “Marry Me a Little” is quintessential Sondheim, a tangled pre-nup agreement filled with contradictory desires for intimacy and distance.

Before last July, I’d categorized “Marry Me a Little” as the desperate outcry of a neurotic man with serious intimacy issues. As my own marriage approaches, I feel far less judgmental. In fact, much of it has begun to strike me as a reasonable contract, harmonizing seemingly opposite but completely understandable needs. Closeness breeds a need for boundaries, and a healthy partnership can benefit from strong, autonomous partners.

Right?

It seems odd to look to Stephen Sondheim as a marriage counselor. But somehow his song of equivocation has bolstered my enthusiasm to tie the knot more than anything Fauré or Brahms could offer. “Marry Me A Little”? No, “Marry Me A Lot!” It’s true, our *Modern Person’s Guide* includes a lot of kooks and kinks, but Sondheim’s ending proclaims the final words of encouragement: “I’m ready!”