

Sweeney Todd

Stephen Sondheim (b. 1930) has written over twenty shows in the course of his career each one unique in its own way, but *Sweeney Todd* was his first to be considered an opera. With 80% music and only 20% spoken words Sondheim challenged the world of opera with the unconventional *Sweeney Todd* (Wolf, www.musicweb.uk.net/SandH/2000/july00/sweeney.htm). The irony of the success of *Sweeney Todd* is the fact that Sondheim himself claimed that he hated opera. *Sweeney Todd* opened on March 1, 1979 at the Uris Theater in New York and was directed by Harold Prince. Len Cariou and Angela Lansbury starred as Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett. Despite fairly a short run of only 577 performances, *Sweeney Todd* won eight Tony Awards including Best Musical (www.sjsondheim.com/SweeneyTodd.htm).

Sweeney Todd is adapted from a play by Christopher Bond who's play is based on the English myth of *The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* which is partly historically based. After a prologue by the chorus, the story begins in 19th century London where we see Anthony and Sweeney Todd arriving on a small boat. Anthony sings about how wonderful it is to be back home in London. A beggar woman comes and harasses Sweeney and Anthony and insists that she knows Sweeney. After Sweeney shoos her away he begins to sing about how horrible London is and tells a story his past. Sweeney leaves Anthony and goes to Nellie Lovett's pie shop and has one of her horrible pies. He inquires about the room above her shop. She tells him that people say the room is haunted because of something bad that had happened there long ago. Sweeney ask to hear more and Mrs. Lovett tells of a barber named Benjamin Barker who had a beautiful wife. A Judge wanted his wife so he wrongly accused Benjamin Barker of a crime and sent him to Australia and raped his wife. After this story Mrs. Lovett realizes that Sweeney Todd is really Benjamin Barker and has returned to get revenge on Judge Turpin and his accomplice Beatle Bamfo. Sweeney learns that his wife drank poison and his daughter is being kept by Judge Turpin. Mrs. Lovett then presents Sweeney with his razors and Sweeney vows to get revenge on the Judge.

Next we see Johanna at the window of Judge Turpin's house where she is kept like a prisoner. Anthony hears her singing and falls in love with her at first sight. Judge Turpin and Beatle see him and warn him to stay away but Anthony vows that he will have Johanna.

The scene goes back to outside Mrs. Lovett's pie shop where a crowd is gathering listening to claims of a salesman named Pirelli who claims to be "the barber of kings and the king of barbers." Sweeney challenges Pirelli to contest of whom can give the closest shave and pull a tooth the quickest. Beatle judges the contest and proclaims Sweeney the winner. Sweeney offers Beatle a free shave in his shop. Later in the pie shop, as Sweeney anxiously awaits Beatle's arrival for his chanced at revenge, Anthony comes and tells Sweeney about how he has fallen in love with Johanna and that he has planned to take her away from Judge Turpin. Sweeney tells Anthony to bring Johanna to the shop. Just then Pirelli arrives with his assistant Tobias. Pirelli has recognized Barker's razors and threatens to reveal Sweeney's identity. Sweeney then kills Pirelli while Mrs. Lovett entertains Tobias downstairs.

Back at Judge Turpin's house, he realizes that Johanna is no longer a child and he no longer thinks of her as a daughter, but as a wife. He tells Johanna that they will be married. Anthony then comes to the window and tells Johanna that he has a plan so that they can be married. Judge Turpin is disappointed by Johanna's lack of enthusiasm to marry him so Beatle suggests he go to the barber to look more appealing.

Once Judge Turpin arrives Sweeney is overjoyed at his chance to get his revenge. He is just about to kill the Judge when Anthony runs in and tells Sweeney about his plans to marry Johanna. The Judge is outraged and leaves the barber shop. Sweeney is so angry at the loss of his chance to seek revenge that he decides he will kill until he has had his revenge on the Judge. Mrs. Lovett comes up with a plan for how to dispose of Pirelli's body as well as the bodies of Sweeney's future victims by cooking them into meat pies.

The second act opens in the pie shop with many customers raving about how wonderful the meat pies taste. Anthony comes and tells Sweeney that the Judge has hidden Johanna somewhere and both Anthony and Sweeney long for Johanna. Mrs. Lovett tries to convince Sweeney that they should use the money from the business and move to the sea but Sweeney is still preoccupied with the thought of his revenge on the Judge.

Later, Anthony returns and tells Sweeney that the Judge has put Johanna in an asylum. Sweeney comes up with a plan of disguising Anthony as a wig maker to get Johanna out of the asylum and tells Anthony to bring Johanna back to the shop. He then writes a letter to the Judge telling him that Anthony has helped Johanna escape and that Johanna will be at the shop that evening. Meanwhile, Tobias is affectionate towards Mrs. Lovett and shows his suspicion for Sweeney. Mrs. Lovett distracts Tobias by allowing him to work in the bake house. Just then the Beatle comes to inspect the shop because some complaints of strange odors. Mrs. Lovett distracts him until Sweeney returns and kills Beatle. Downstairs in the bake house, Tobias is shocked to find human remains in some of the meat when he sees Beatle's body come down into the back house.

Anthony helps Johanna to escape from the asylum. Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett realize that Tobias is missing and must know about the contents of the meat pies. As they are looking for him, the Beggar Woman comes into the barber's shop and confesses that she knows something is going on and again asks Sweeney if he knows her. The Judge arrives looking for Johanna and Sweeney kills the Beggar Woman. Sweeney then takes his revenge on the Judge. Just then Mrs. Lovett screams from the bake house. Sweeney runs down to find her trying to put the Judge and the Beggar Woman both into the oven. She tries to keep Sweeney away from the Beggar Woman but Sweeney realizes that the Beggar Woman is his wife Lucy. He is at first angered that Mrs. Lovett did not tell him that his wife was still alive but then forgives her and begins to dance with her. He dances her right over to the oven then throws her in. Sweeney weeps over his wife and Tobias enters. He sees Sweeney and picks up the razor and slits Sweeney's throat. Anthony, Johanna and two policemen come in and are shocked at the scene. The chorus then sings the epilogue.

Sondheim uses his music in various ways to help enhance the plot of the opera. Although Sondheim's music is not as melodic as the "movie soundtrack" sound of Verdi and Wagner, his music helps portray the mood and subtext. For example, in *Epiphany*, Sweeney's anger is shown in the tension and abruptness of the music. The background music also allows for more emphasis on the meaning of the lyrics. In some cases, the music contrasts the meaning of the words giving it a different meaning. In *Poor Thing* the music is very cheerful while the words tell a sad story. Sondheim also uses many complex rhythms and chords in his music which keep the audience on edge through the show. In the opening of the show, Sondheim uses a rendition of the opening notes of the *Dies Irae*, part of the Mass for the Dead in the Roman Catholic Church (www.sjsondheim.com/sweeneytodd). This adds to the morbid theme of the show, evoking a haunting feeling in the audience from the first notes of the show.

Sondheim is famous for using leitmotifs in his music and *Sweeney Todd* no exception. Almost every character in the show has his or her own leitmotif. For example, Johanna has a trill, bird-sounding theme every time she is mentioned because she has been locked up all her life like a bird in a cage. In addition to the personal leitmotifs, Sondheim uses the contrast of dark, evil sounding music for the immoral characters of Sweeney Todd, Mrs. Lovett, and Judge Turpin, with the light, pure sounding music of the good, moral characters of Johanna, Anthony, and Tobias. This contrast of light and dark is shown especially well in the quartet sung by Johanna, Anthony, Judge Turpin, and Beatle: Johanna and Anthony sing of their love for one another while Judge Turpin and Beatle sing with a much darker tone. Sondheim also uses stereotypical images to give add some comedy to the show. For example, the character of Pirelli, though only in a few numbers, is portrayed as a typical "Italian Opera" singer. The chorus plays an important role by telling what is going on in the show from an outside point of view. The chorus opens the show and sets the scene as well as closes it.

Although Sondheim's music plays an important role in *Sweeney Todd*, his lyrics are of as much, if not more importance to the opera. Unlike some operas, the lyrics are sung very clearly allowing the audience to absorb their full meaning. In many songs, two or more people are singing at the same time, but saying completely different things like in the song *Kiss Me* as well as in the song *My Friends*. In *Sweeney Todd* there is very little sung recit. Instead there are spoken words between musical numbers making much more of a distinction from number to number. I seems, however, that Sondheim had not originally intended for spoken word at all: "I started it, trying to write everything myself because it was going to be virtually an opera. I did the first twenty minutes and I realized I was only on page five of Bond's script. So at that rate, the show would have possibly been nine hours long"- Stephen Sondheim (<http://www.sjsondheim.com/SweeneyTodd.html>).

For a man who said hated opera, *Sweeney Todd* is an amazing production. The words and music blend beautifully for songs that evoke emotions in the listener from happiness, to hope, to anger, to sadness. *Sweeney Todd* is truly a groundbreaking piece in the opera as well as musical theater world and one can only hope that Sondheim will continue to contribute to music in such a fantastic way.