



A People Without Melody



Kurt Poterack

As a college music professor, I am asked from time to time by students what I think of this or that popular song or songwriter. Lyrics aside, I like to think that I can speak with some authority on the music itself, having a masters and doctorate in music composition. At one point I decided that I would sit down and do some careful listening to current top-forty songs and write brief critiques of them. I did this over a period of several years. One thing struck me continually and almost without exception; I felt like the old lady in the 1980s hamburger commercial who would exclaim, “Where’s the beef?”

Except that I would exclaim, “Where’s the melody?” Over and over . . .

Perhaps I should clarify that when I say “melody,” I mean a *tuneful* melody—the kind that popular songs used to have in abundance. In fact, this used to be the hallmark of the popular song. I am speaking about the sort of melody that has a winsomeness to it, even a portability. Such a melody is one

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that is so appealing that people want to “carry it with them,” sing, hum, even whistle it while they are driving to work, doing the dishes, folding laundry, etc.

Indeed, such a melody is generally something that the non-professional can sing unaccompanied. Even though there may be recordings of such a song by professional singers with very elaborate instrumental accompaniments, this is not the only way that it can be performed. The melody makes sense by itself. A tuneful melody is going to have a shape, a waxing and waning, a rise and fall of the pitches, a focal point or two, and a long-term forward motion from note to note to note to its logical conclusion. A good melody has, as Aaron Copland once famously wrote, an “inevitability.” This logical shape is what makes it beautiful and, therefore, desirable.

It is my determination that after about 1970, such melodies went into rapid decline; after about 1980, they almost ceased to exist. Why did this happen and what, if anything, does this say about modern society and cultural mores? Is there a connection between music and the way people live, between the way artists live and the sort of music they create? These connections between art, artist, morality, and society are things that philosophers have mused upon at some length,

so let us briefly explore them before we return to our specific topic of popular song melodies.



First, there is one thing that we need to get out of the way.

From time to time I hear from fellow cultural conservatives, no doubt over-interpreting Plato, that a man of bad character cannot help but create music or art that reflects the disorder in his soul. Likewise, a man of good character will necessarily create music or art that reflects his ordered soul. I call this “*ad hominem* music criticism.” It is a very dangerous approach. While this view can end up being correct in particular cases, without proper nuance and formulation, it is overly simplistic. It can lead to absurd conclusions that do not correspond to reality.

As is often the case, much light can be shed on difficult questions by turning to that great medieval philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas—particularly the distinction he made between Art and Prudence. Both involve the perfection of the Practical Intellect. However, unlike Prudence, which has as its end the good of man (i.e. morality), Art has as its end the good of the work itself. As the twentieth-century expositor of St. Thomas, Jacques Maritain, wrote, “if a craftsman contrives a good piece of woodwork or jewelry, the fact of his being spiteful or debauched is immaterial, just as it is immaterial for a geometer to be a jealous or wicked man, if his demonstrations provide us with geometrical truth.”¹

To expand upon this, one could say that in order to produce a great

work of art, one has to possess three things: 1) a *developed* talent; 2) the *desire* to produce a beautiful art work—even if simply to please one’s patron or the public; and 3) the tools, materials, and forms that his culture has given him with which he can properly express such beauty. Thus a skilled artist who wants to paint a beautiful picture of his current mistress, and who lives in a culture that has a tradition of beautiful art, will most likely succeed. The fact of the profound moral ugliness of his unfaithfulness to his wife will probably not impede his ability to paint a beautiful portrait if this is what he wants to do.

However—and this is key—sometimes, for a number of reasons, specific artistic techniques fail to be transmitted so that artists can no longer express certain feelings and ideals even if they *want* to do so. Thus, such a culture can no longer even be hypocritical. For example, the people in such a society might less and less want to feel love, honor, and tenderness, even as ideals to strive after, since they are no longer represented in their art and music. (And, consequently, artists will be even less motivated to preserve the techniques by which these things are expressed.) At the very least, you can tell what a society idealizes in general by studying its music, and I have long thought that a music theorist can be an effective diagnostician of a culture’s soul.



This is still rather abstract; so, let me make it more concrete by taking the reader on a brief tour of American popular song. Essentially, American popular music begins with Stephen Foster in the mid-

nineteenth century. Many of his songs are mistaken for folk songs, even though Stephen Foster was a paid professional who wrote his songs for professional performers who sang them in minstrel shows. While most of his songs have the purity and simplicity of folk-song melodies, his “Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair”—for example—approaches the level of a Schubert art song, betraying Foster’s training at the hands of the German-born music teacher Henry Kleber.

After Stephen Foster, there is a long fallow period that spans the turn of the century, during

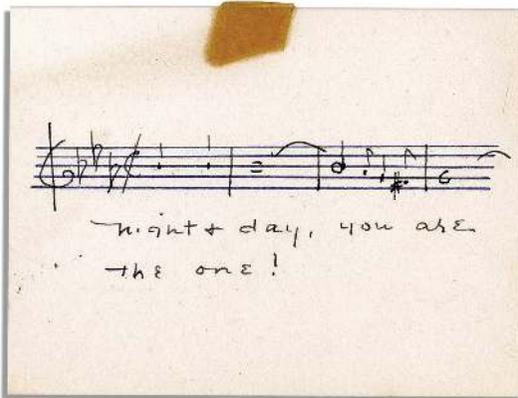
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which vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley produce many trivial, forgettable songs. Even the memorable ones, such as “Sidewalks of New York,” have a quality of sentimentality that date them.

In the mid-1920s, we have the beginnings of what is later termed the era of the Great American Songbook. Some argue that this era ends about 1950, others say about 1960. These songs are mini-classics and transcend their era. Almost all of the major songwriters of this time, such as Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Richard Rodgers, and Cole Porter

had classical musical training. I like to point out that Cole Porter, a very “naughty” man, even aside from his sometimes suggestive lyrics, nonetheless studied harmony and counterpoint under Pietro Yon, a man who went on to become chief organist and choirmaster at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. This is probably one of the last times that a traditional church musician and a popular songwriter drank together from the well of classical musical culture.

Of course, not all songs composed during this era actually belong to the Great American Song Book. There were many inferior composers who had short-lived hits. Many of these songs were average; quite a few were sentimental and corny. Going into the 1950s there is the phenomenon of the “novelty song,” of which Patti Page’s 1953 hit “The Doggie in the Window” is probably the best-known example.



Four measures of a song by Cole Porter on a greeting card in his own hand.

However, as terrible as it was, it was a singable melody that could stand on its own two (albeit, corny) feet. During this time there is also the emergence of two important movements: Rock and Roll and the American folk-music revival.

These two movements continue into the 1960s and much has been written about them elsewhere. Many have noted John Lennon and Paul McCartney, who had a song-writing talent that put them beyond many of their rock song-writing colleagues. However, as talented as they were, they often get classified with what is sometimes called the “Kiddie Pop” of the era. The “Adult Pop” of the 1960s, represented by such songwriters as the Bossa Nova composer Antônio Carlos Jobim and the American Burt Bacharach, produced tuneful and harmonically sophisticated popular songs. Jobim had been influenced by Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and the Brazilian classical composer Heitor Villa-Lobos; Bacharach had a Bachelor of Music degree and had studied composition with the twentieth-century classical composers Henry Cowell and Darius Milhaud.

So, by the end of the decade there was reason for hope that the 1970s might go reasonably well. Even if the Great American Songbook era was formally over, the Great American Melody continued to be written. While it was not only Americans who composed these melodies, nonetheless, American audiences still seemed to enjoy a beautifully written melody—at least as a part of their “listening diet.” Something different, however, happens during the 1970s. In 1970, the number-one and number-two popular hit songs were “Bridge over Troubled Water” and “Close to You”—two well-shaped, tuneful melodies. By the end of the decade, in 1979, the top two pop hits were “My Sharona” and “Bad Girls”—both rather profane dance numbers. To be fair, these songs work in their own way because of their

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focus on an energetic rhythmic accompaniment and a strong beat that made them attractive to dancers. Melody, however, is a secondary element in these songs. Indeed, in "My Sharona" the melody seems to serve as a mere accessory to the driving accompanimental rhythm, which takes center stage.

This situation continues through the 1980s and beyond. Even though disco may have died, the emphasis on dance music continues as most pop hits have strong danceable rhythms, but very few have tuneful melodies that can stand on their own. The late George Michael's 1984 hit "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go" is a fairly typical example: a song with an attractive, bouncy rhythm, the whole focus of which is a four-measure melodic "hook"² which is repeated endlessly throughout the song. Not a dance tune, but surprisingly similar in its basic technique, is the 1997 hit ballad "My Heart Will Go On" from the movie *Titanic*. It has an even weaker verse melody, essentially a teetering back and forth between two principal notes, until it gets to the short bombastic refrain which, repeated *ad infinitum*, is meant to grab you by the collar with its emotional bid—before sinking back into mediocrity.

Ironically, at this time the influence of Broadway, long a source of tastefully written, tuneful ballads, begins to dry up—but for

very different reasons. Beginning in the late 1960s, Broadway composers seemed to want to get *more* sophisticated. Even if they used popular styles, many of these composers started to conceive of their musicals as mini-Wagnerian music dramas, with every single line of text set to seamlessly composed music out of which few, if any, tunes could be extracted. The "hit-tune approach" of Broadway's recent past began to seem very *déclassé* to them. In fact, the long-reigning doyen of Broadway composers, Stephen Sondheim, has produced few actual songs over his long career—the gorgeous ballad "Send in the Clowns" being, perhaps, his most notable exception.

What I marvel at these days is the seeming inability of many pop songwriters to write even an eight-measure phrase—probably the most basic phrase length in music. To take Adele as an example, most of her songs consist of the stitching together of four-measure units made up of one melodic idea, repeated over and over. To be fair, this is part of her technique to create a kind of a hypnotic effect, and she is not alone in this. I call it the "four-chord mysticism," because, usually, each four-measure unit consists of four chords, repeated over and over like a mantra. (Although, sometimes I wonder if she actually could write a traditional ballad if she ever had the desire to do so.)



Popular singer-songwriter Adele in concert.

At any rate, try singing her “Rolling in the Deep” without the recording; you would likely start getting bored by the third iteration of that opening four-measure motive. The reason her performance of it works is that, through the addition at strategic points of instruments, back-up singers, and variations in her voice, a sense of build and forward motion is created. Oftentimes she later introduces a contrasting, repeated melodic motive, but the point is that the melody itself does not have much of a shape and sense of forward motion. It is the professional *arrangement* that creates this.

Finally, let us speak of the phenomenon of rap. Like it or hate it, raps are not songs, properly speaking, because there is no melody. Rap involves the rhythmicized speaking of words against a strong, steady beat. Indeed, there is usually a four-measure, repeated musical accompaniment in the background, although I would argue that this is not constitutive of the genre. Putting aside rap’s often morally noxious lyrics, I would make one basic observation: it should not be surprising that a culture, with an already-weak sense of melody, would elevate to such a high level, within its popular musical culture, a genre totally bereft of melody.

With rap, we may have finally bottomed out.

Before I conclude, I should stress that I am not promoting any particular style or era when I speak of the well-crafted, tuneful melody. My ecumenical canon would include such songs as “Beautiful Dreamer,” “Blue Skies,” “All the Things You Are,” “Stella by Starlight,” “But Beautiful,” “Somewhere,” “The Sound of Silence,” “Yesterday,” “Windmills of Your Mind,” “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” “Killing Me Softly with His Song,” and “Just the Way You Are.” These are only a few examples of songs that you can both enjoy your favorite artist singing *and* sing on your own, because these songs make sense as pure melodies.



So, what does it all mean—this clear loss of melody in today’s popular song? I almost don’t want to answer the question, but just let the profundity of this accurately diagnosed symptom sink in. I am more a musical technician than anything else, but it is clear to me that the loss of the lyricism of the well-written ballad, and the human values that it represents, is itself a major travesty. How could it be otherwise?

What I also see is the loss of almost any connection between the wisdom of the classical art music of Western Civilization and modern popular music—something that was not the case even a generation ago. There was a time when popular-song composers such as George Gershwin and Duke Ellington looked to the long forms of classical music as a means of liberation from the thirty-two-bar song form so prevalent in

the popular music of their day. I can only imagine their dismay if either were alive today to see how some pop musicians have freed themselves from the tyranny of the thirty-two-bar song by creating . . . *the four-bar song!*³

But this loss of long-term musical thought is also connected to the fact that few ordinary people participate meaningfully in music anymore. In the past a person of average musical ability could both enjoy listening to Nat King Cole sing “Mona Lisa,” and enjoy singing the melody on his own; fewer people today would want to sing one of Ariana Grande’s latest hits unaccompanied. Even if one enjoys her oeuvre, there is really not much *melodic* pleasure to be had from her music because, whatever else can be said about her, her *tunes* have little shape.

Popular music is now a kind of voodoo that is practiced on a very distracted, mute populace. People don’t listen closely and are, instead, subliminally induced to feel a limited number of musical emotions: the feeling of being hip, urban, gritty, sexy, funky, soulful—perhaps even a short-lived elation—before they move on to other distractions. Only a few substitutions are allowed. For example, if you want to substitute “country” for “urban,” a banjo and a few twangs will be thrown in, but the music will be surprisingly similar. You will almost certainly experience neither true musical lyricism, nor well-crafted, musically intelligent, beauty. Also, you will definitely not be given a well-shaped melody that you can take home with you and sing on your own. The superstar performer almost always has to be a part of the package.

The sad thing is, as far as I can see, too many people are content with this state of affairs. **P**

Endnotes

1. See Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), 23.
2. A “hook” is a short melodic passage in popular music meant to catch the listener’s attention in a conspicuous way. It is to music what a red dress is to women’s fashion.
3. A measure (or “bar”), which is a grouping of a specific number of beats of music, is the standard way in which song length is calculated. Since the 1920s, the typical popular song has had a musical length of thirty-two measures. This thirty-two-measure musical unit is then repeated several times with different lyrics each time. To get an idea of the newer four-bar “McSong” approach, listen to Adele’s “Hometown Glory” or Mumford and Sons’ “Dust Bowl Dance” – to give just two examples of a common enough phenomenon.

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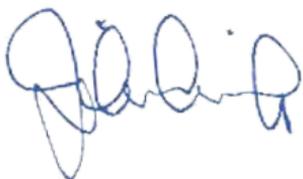
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