

6. And The Beat Goes On (“The Room Where It Happens”)

In This Lesson

- *The what and why of scenic rhythms and pacing of the plot*
- *Musical rhythms and how they pertain to the moment in the show for the characters and the audience*
- *How to rely on the natural spoken rhythms of the English language*

Overview

Rhythm in music and lyrics is almost an oxymoron – music has meter; lyrics have meter. While some music sets words to music more freely than others, and doesn't rely on a steady rhythmic pulse to continue, this is rare and except for a very dramatic section of a song or as an introductory transition from spoken words to singing, almost unheard of in the theatre. Perhaps more complicated to consider is the kind of rhythm that is heard in plays and musical books when there is no music being played. That is, scenic rhythm and pacing.

Rhythm in the Book

Within a scene, there may be several important moments, or beats. Sometimes a beat of a scene is a topic of conversation; sometimes it is a negotiation between two or more people; sometimes it is a direct confrontation; sometimes an inadvertent conflict. Most scenes contain several such moments, or beats. The beats of a scene are not equal, because not all the moments have an equal impact on the primary story and theme. Writers have a tendency to vary these beats in length and pacing to keep from lulling the audience with a predictable pace. The number of characters may change from beat to beat, so the social dynamics may also change. Short, long, shorter, longer...some variation of this will occur. This is scenic rhythm, the amount of stage time devoted to each beat of the scene. Pacing refers to the actual speed of a moment. Is the beat fast-paced or lazy and tranquil? Is one character motivated to barrel through like a locomotive while another is totally relaxed and willing to wait until hell heats up before

even saying the next line? The pacing usually changes during a scene, gathering momentum as characters close in on their goals and losing speed as characters fail to achieve their ends.

Generally in the first act of a musical there will be a lot of variety in the scenic rhythms and pacing, but the second act will probably increase the pace throughout, driving toward the climax with more and more speed. Short, shorter, shortest will be the progression of scene lengths in most cases. If not done by changing scene lengths, this effect will be done with pacing: fast, faster, fastest.

To recap the three most important elements of narrative story-telling: A clearly defined beginning, middle and end; a strongly motivated central character; something of importance depending on the outcome. Most dramatists take the trouble to outline their ideas before starting to write a play, but many begin from a different plan involving either an interesting character or highly charged situation to begin writing – waiting to let the characters begin to define the plot and theme. This is not a good way to write a musical for several reasons.

1. Generally a musical is written by more than one person, and successful collaboration requires some kind of measurable agreement
2. Musicals are complex and must emphasize the emotional aspects of a story in order to create moments where song is the best way to communicate.
3. Musicals most often take a long time from concept to draft and beyond. It is not unusual for a musical to take as much as 10 years from the original idea to the Broadway opening. (Read But He Doesn't Know The Territory by Meredith Wilson.)

By building a plot outline from a story idea, writers and collaborators can play a game of “what if” for a few days or weeks until they have shaped a story with a beginning, middle and end to their satisfaction. The outline is not etched in stone, but it is a document in just a few pages that makes it easier to assess in terms of dramatic viability and interest. Think of this outline as looking like the liner notes of an old original cast album. Scene by scene short paragraphs that tell you who, what, where, when and why for each character.

Now compare the information in those paragraphs. Concentrate on the actions of the characters – who does what to whom – rather than what people say. What is happening to the pace of the action? If it isn't increasing in the second act, fix it now.

Use this same methodology with each scene. What has to happen in the scene? What will happen first? How does this cause or prepare for the next beat of the scene to

Lin Manuel Miranda

1/16/80 –

Bookwriter, Composer,
Lyricist



At this writing, Miranda is only 37 years old, and already he has won a Pulitzer Prize, two Grammy Awards, an Emmy, a MacArthur Fellowship and three Tony Awards.

He is best-known for the musical *Hamilton* but his other Broadway credits are *In the Heights* and *Bring It On The Musical*. For film, he co-wrote the score for Disney's *Moana*.

Quote: You know what's a great way of tricking people into thinking you're a genius? Write a show about geniuses!

occur? Keep in mind that some of the seeds of the next moment may exist in a prior scene. In the best of all possible librettos, each scene will accelerate toward its end, and the scenes in each act will also gain momentum as the end of the act approaches. Here is a brief outline of *Hamilton* to illustrate this effect.

Act One

1. A brief bio of Hamilton, an orphan, up to his arrival in the American colonies at the age of 19, where he supports American independence.
2. Hamilton seeks out Aaron Burr who recommends caution over impetuous action, but Hamilton is anxious for action and befriends Lafayette and others of like mind.
3. The wealthy Schuyler sisters embrace New York and the spirit of revolution in the air.
4. Hamilton refutes the anti-Revolution forces publicly. King George warns Americans that he is ready to fight if necessary to maintain sovereignty.
5. George Washington enlists Hamilton as his aide-de-camp, even though Hamilton would prefer to see military action.
6. Hamilton flirts with Angelica Schuyler but she introduces him to her sister Eliza knowing Eliza is interested in the man, and preferring to keep her own options open, even though Angelica is smitten herself.
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12. Hamilton flirts with Angelica Schuyler but she introduces him to her sister Eliza knowing Eliza is interested in the man, and preferring to keep her own options open, even though Angelica is smitten herself.
13. Hamilton weds Eliza. When Aaron Burr admits an affair with a married woman, Hamilton advises making it public but Burr decides to keep it to himself.
14. Washington refuses to let Hamilton lead troops. Washington promotes Charles Lee who performs badly at a battle and is relieved, after which Lee slanders Washington in retaliation. Against Washington's instructions, Laurel, a friend of Hamilton's, challenges Lee to a duel and Hamilton serves as his second, with Burr serving as Lee's second, angering Washington.
15. Washington order Hamilton to return home where he learns Eliza is pregnant and looking forward to a quiet life with Hamilton and their children.
16. At a turning point in the war Washington finally gives Hamilton the command he has wanted, and Hamilton, along with Lafayette, leads the troops to victory at Yorktown, bringing an end to the war.
17. Hamilton's son Philip is born, as is Burr's daughter Theodosia. After learning his friend Lauren has been killed in a senseless battle, Hamilton returns to New York where he and Burr both pursue careers as lawyers. Burr is awed by Hamilton's intensity and success. Events move quickly. Hamilton joins the Constitutional Convention, is instrumental in the writing of the Federalist Papers. After learning that Angelica has married and will move to London, Hamilton accepts the job of Treasury Secretary against his wife's wishes.

Act Two

1. Jefferson and Madison try to block Hamilton's financial plan and Washington urges him to find a compromise.
2. Hamilton's son Philip turns nine, singing a song he composed. Angelica indicates Hamilton's affections for her may be troublesome. She and Eliza urge Hamilton to spend the summer with them, but he refuses, citing he must work on his plan while the family goes away on vacation.
3. Hamilton is seduced by a woman only to be blackmailed by her husband. He pays the blackmail and continues the affair.
4. Hamilton finds acceptance for his financial plan in a compromise that moves the capital from New York to Washington, DC, all done in a private meeting. Burr is envious of Hamilton's access to the decision making process, switches parties and defeats Eliza's father in an election for the Senate.
5. Burr, Jefferson and Madison all chafe under Washington's continued support of Hamilton's policies and seek a way to discredit him.
6. Washington will step down as Jefferson and Adams vie for the presidency.
7. Adams fires Hamilton, who writes an inflammatory critique of the administration. Jefferson, Madison and Burr believe they have found proof Hamilton has embezzled money, forcing him to admit to his affair with Maria Reynolds. Rather than trust the men to keep his secret, Hamilton writes an admission of the affair which breaks Eliza's heart and causes her to burn all his correspondence. Hamilton falls out of public favor because of the affair.

8. Years pass. Hamilton's son Philip challenges Geroge Eacker to a duel for insulting his father, and Philip is killed as a result. Hamilton asks Eliza's forgiveness and she eventually agrees.
9. Adams is defeated in the election of 1800 while Jefferson and Burr tied to win. Hamilton endorses Jefferson feeling Burr lacks principles and Burr challenges Hamilton to the duel.
10. Hamilton is shot and dies of his wounds as Burr realizes he will be remembered as the man who killed Hamilton.
11. In the finale Eliza has worked to preserve Hamilton's legacy, established an orphanage in his honor and now awaits her own death when she expects to see him again.

That's the gist of a three hour show in 2 pages. Of course a great deal is left out. However we can appreciate the magnitude of the task: Tell the story of the American revolution while focusing on the character of Alexander Hamilton, the ambitions that drove him, the women he loved, the loss of his son and finally the loss of his own life. Check out the way events in the story move quickly, sometimes jumping years in order to get to the next milestone. Rhythm and pacing in the order of events play a large role in the success of the show.

Rhythm in the Music

There aren't any rhythms that can't be used in the theatre, and it is safe to say that more rhythm is better than less rhythm. In the creakiest old-fashioned 50s formulaic romcom musical there was plenty of toe-tapping and finger snapping, even in the ballads. Cole Porter never wrote a ballad that didn't have a strong rhythmic pulse to support it, a foxtrot in 4, a beguine (his favorite) or a waltz.

On Broadway today rhythm is exploding. *American Idiot*. *Kinky Boots*. *Hamilton*. These titles exist side by side with such conventional shows as *Chicago*, *Something's Rotten*, and *Hello Dolly* and other shows and revivals to come. Whether contemporary or 70 years old, all these shows exhibit an array of rhythms in their scores.

Here's a great rule of thumb for composers: Once the rhythmic lilt of a song has been established, once people start tapping their feet or nodding in time to the music, interrupt this at your peril. Never interrupt the rhythm just for a musical effect. Always have a strong dramaturgical reason the interrupt or change the rhythm of a song once it gets going. A new character singing may require a different orchestration and tempo; a change of idea occurring in the mind of the character as the lyric unfolds may require a stoppage or interruption ("Hey, my kid ain't even been born yet!" – "Soliloquy," *Carousel*.)

The song is happening in the theatre where life occurs moment to moment, unfolding before us as we watch. Therefore it is pushing us forever forward, and it is the responsibility of the writing to keep it going. Only a solid dramaturgical event can justify interrupting the list of a rhythmic theatre song. Even such dynamics as ritard and accelerando in a ballad should reflect something the moment requires rather than the composer's desire to add a flourish.

Listen again to the song, "The Room Where It Happens." It has a very bouncy, swing-like rhythm. Why? Where does this particular rhythm come from? I can't say exactly. Either Miranda or his music director decided movement was needed, and settled on the rhythm we hear. It's incessant and demanding in the verses and very bouncy and swing-like in the choruses, in keeping with the unbridled jealous angst of Aaron Burr as he longs to be in that room where decisions are made. Listen to it again.

Even though the show *Hamilton* is beloved for its use of Hip Hop music, to my ear this song is pure Broadway and it bounces as much as any up-tempo song from the literature. "Friendship" from *Anything Goes*. "You Gotta Have Heart" from *Damn Yankees*. "Seven and a Half Cents" from *Pajama Game*. "You're Never Fully Dressed Without A Smile" from *Annie*. Yes, the verses of "The Room Where It Happens" are spoken over the rhythm – hip hop – but the choruses are sung – and they bounce.

Rhythm in Lyrics

Regardless of which comes first, the music or the lyrics, lyrics must scan rhythmically. If the lyrics come first, the scansion must have some musical logic about it in order to create a shape the composer can use to invent a tune that the audience can identify and retain.

The lyrics of *Hamilton* do not always scan rhythmically in such a logical way because many of these words are not sung to a rhythmic melody. They are spoken in a rhythm that can vary as needed by the words as long as the underlying beat sounds of the orchestration are consistent and even. Then, when the lyrics switch from spoken rap lyrics to sung, they follow a more traditional pattern so the tune can repeat.

Examine some songs from the literature to see the relationship between lyrical rhythms, melodic rhythms and the rememberability of the tune.

Here's a lyric by Comden and Green written for the musical *Bells Are Ringing*:

Just in time

I found you just in time
Before you came my time was running low

I was lost
The losing dice were tossed
My bridges all were crossed, no where to go

Now you're here
And now I know just where I'm going, no more
Doubt or fear
I'm on my way, for love came

Just in time
I found you just in time
To save my lonely life that lovely day.ⁱ

Listen to the song if you have a recording, or just sing it to yourself if you know the tune. Pay attention to the underlined words. See how the three note motive is repeated rhythmically in the lyrics and melodically and rhythmically in the tune. This is not an accident. It's never an accident when the words and music work well together. And it doesn't matter which comes first, the music or the lyrics. In every case, the words and music ought to go together as well as these do. It makes them easy to sing, easy to hear, and easy to remember.

Here's a lyric from *The King And I*:

Getting to know you
Getting to know all about you
Getting to like you
Getting to hope you like me

Getting to know you
Putting it my way but nicely
You are precisely
My cup of teaⁱⁱ

"Getting to" five times, "putting it" once and "you are pre" (-cisely) once. There's a triplet at the start of each phrase and the words trip off the singer's tongue easily so we can both hear and understand the lyric instantly with no work on our part. I can't stress this

often enough – great theatre song exhibit great and perfect prosody, matching the rhythm of the melodic line to the natural spoken rhythm of the words closely.

The lyricist who wants to help the composer create interesting and remember-able tunes must constantly look for rhythmic devices that can repeat, like the triplet in the song above which is facilitated by the parallel structure of the gerunds of “getting” and “putting” and then echoed by the first 3 syllables of “you are pre-cisely.” Similarly, the three syllables of “just in time” and “came my time” and “I was lost” and “dice were tossed” and the other underlined words all have the primary accent on the first syllable so those words can land on the downbeat of a measure, allowing us to anticipate and hear them clearly.

Parallel grammatical structure like the gerunds in Getting To Know You, and parallel rhythmic structure like “Just In Time,” are sprinkled throughout the musical theatre literature. Look for it and emulate it. It is the pathway to communication for theatre songs.

ⁱⁱ Lyrics from “Just I Time,” music by Jules Styne, lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green

ⁱⁱ Lyrics from “Getting To Know You,” music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II