

“On Medleys and Other Matters” by Roy Sander

Medleys

Let me open with a rather broadly stated observation: Too many people are doing too many medleys in too many shows. Now I'll narrow in and expand on this. [Perversely, and yet delightfully, this oxymoronic last sentence is not self-contradictory.]

By *medley*, I refer to any combination of more than one song. Let's start at the numerically low end: a pairing of two songs. This comes in a few flavors. The tastiest—i.e., most satisfying to the audience—is a performance of two complete, or nearly complete, songs in which one segues to the other without an applause break. The first song not only delivers its own message and rewards, it also establishes a context for the second, imbuing it with a subtext that enables the listener to hear the song in a particular, and perhaps new, light, thereby enjoying a richer experience. By not significantly truncating the songs, each can be given its full due, and the combination can pack a greater wallop than if the songs had been performed separately.

Obviously, the songs must be carefully chosen if these benefits are to be realized. (Some years ago, one hapless singer paired Amanda McBroom's "Ship in a Bottle" with Christopher Cross's "Sailing"—apparently believing they shared a nautical theme.) Further, while a combination may offer the *potential* for a synergistic relationship, your interpretation must deliver on that potential. In a recent Dorothy Fields show, another singer did a medley of "You Should See Yourself," "The Way You Look Tonight," and "Lovely to Look At." Unfortunately, she did nothing to relate the songs in any substantive way, leaving us to wonder why she combined them, and to conclude that they all involved the sense of sight—a far-too-superficial link. But take care. Even when songs are well combined and your interpretations masterful, if you do too many pairings in your show, this approach will become tired and predictable, and its effectiveness will diminish.

Another two-song variant is a combination of the verse of one song and the body of a second. The first time I heard this approach, I was taken with its inventiveness. But that was many, many, many years ago. Now this is done so often it has become rather a cliché. Other overdone two-song models include doing a little more than the verse of one song followed by a second song, and doing a portion of one song followed by a portion of another. What is more, many of the two-song models have three-song counterparts. (See my comments on shortened versions three paragraphs down.)

An increasingly popular device entails combining refrains, choruses, or other extracts of two songs to create a quasi-new entity. While musical directors are frequently extremely skillful at constructing these collages, and though I have witnessed a few such compositions that made dramatically strong statements, more often than not the mongrel is not as compelling as the original two purebreds.

There are factors beyond simply not working very well that argue against mixing different sources—or at least should induce you to seriously reconsider doing so. Songs are the product of writers, who have devoted a lot of talent and effort in creating them; they are not natural resources, to be extracted and molded to meet our needs. Taking such liberties with them smacks of presumption. It is especially disrespectful and hubristic when the arrangement deprives one of the songs of its melody and unique quality, as is often the case. Performing a song as written affords ample latitude for singers to put their individual stamps on them. (I am excluding from this discussion such legitimate stylizations as jazz, in which liberties are taken with the music and meter, but in which the original lyrics should be honored, and variations imposed at the very end of an arrangement.)

Further, singing only portions of songs can be a bit of a cop-out. By mixing extracts of two songs, singers sometimes attempt to use the *combination* to give the proceedings interest, rather than accepting the challenge of making their *interpretation* deep and rich. It is relatively easy to perform a couple of refrains and a chorus of a song and do a pretty good job of it. It is far more difficult to interpret an entire song and hold the audience's interest throughout. What is more, good songwriters generally know what they are doing: songs have however many refrains and choruses they have because that is what it takes to make their point and have emotional impact. And even when a writer concludes a song by merely repeating a refrain and/or chorus, it is the singer's responsibility not to repeat his/her prior reading of it, but, rather, to convey an emotional state or point of view that advances the interpretation. As a general rule, the shorter the extract, the less weight and impact your rendition will have.

Finally, we get to traditional medleys—strings of relatively brief extracts of several, or many, songs—perhaps as a survey of a particular songwriter's work, perhaps songs with a common theme, etc. As we have all seen, these can be quite wonderful. For medleys of serious songs, guard against making the extracts too brief or the medley will almost certainly not work on an *emotional* level; however, comic medleys can often withstand or even thrive on this approach. Whether serious or comic, do not include more than one or two medleys in your show; the law of diminishing returns applies to traditional medleys as well. What's more, a terrific song performed authoritatively will trump a medley seven times out of ten. (I recognize that there are shows or unique situations in which an abundance of medleys can be used to good effect as part of a broader theme or agenda.)

Political Correctness and Other Blights

Anton H. Disselkoen, a reader in Florida, sent me an e-mail voicing an opinion and asking me to comment on it. Here is what he had to say:

I am a little dismayed at our attempt to make everything PC in our United States. Not that I want to go back to the insensitive ways of the past, but I think we have taken it too far. Even to the point of changing words of songs because they might dent our sensibilities. The words of "Ol' Man River" [are] a case in point. Correcting the

English "grammar" is obviously not what the [lyricists] had in mind. If they were portraying a country bumpkin or "God forbid" an ethnic minority they colored their lyrics to match the music and mood and story. I really don't see that it should be a problem for "modern" audiences to accept that at the time of writing or the time portrayed in the play/musical this was accepted speech.

If you have read my writing in the past, you know that I am a stickler for staying true to original lyrics, so as you can imagine, I agree with this reader's stance. Irving Berlin's "Let Me Sing and I'm Happy" is another case in point. Written in 1930, the song was introduced by Al Jolson in the film "Mammy." A lyric goes "let me sing of Dixie's charms/ of cotton fields and mammy's arms." Most people today sing that second line as "of Swanee's shores and mother's arms" or a variant thereof. I think that's regrettable, not only because it wants authenticity, but also because the more formal word *mother* lacks the nostalgic warmth of the original.

I have seen a copy of the sheet music with these alternate lyrics in place of the original, so they may very well have been penned by Irving Berlin, himself. This doesn't alter my opinion that the original words are superior and should be the ones sung, but it does raise the issue of what one should do when songwriter-sanctioned alternate lyrics exist. I would say the answer depends on why the alternate lyrics were written. If a lyricist bowdlerized his own work because of puritanical broadcast or film standards, I think one should thumb one's nose at Mr. Bowdler and his modern-day counterparts and sing the original lyrics in every instance. For example, with Cole Porter's "Anything Goes," one should always sing "but now, God knows/ anything goes" instead of "now heaven knows..." Similarly, with Rodgers and Hart's "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," one should sing "he's a laugh, and I love it/ because the laugh's on me" instead of "he may laugh, but I love it/ although the laugh's on me," and "couldn't sleep/ and wouldn't sleep/ until I could sleep where I shouldn't sleep," instead of "...till love came and told me I shouldn't sleep."

However, what about original lyrics that are so specific to the show for which they were written that a cabaret audience might not understand the reference? There I think it's a judgment call. For example, with Jerry Herman's "If He Walked Into My Life," I would *suggest* singing the original "if that boy with the bugle" instead of the popular alternate, "if that boy with a promise." And with Jule Styne/Bob Merrill's "Don't Rain on My Parade" from "Funny Girl," I prefer "hey Mr. Arnstein" to "hey Mr. Ziegfeld." On the other hand, in "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," the encore contains references to Mr. Simpson's money that will make sense only to people who remember that it is *Mrs.* Simpson who sings the song in "Pal Joey"; accordingly, I suggest dropping that entire refrain—as nearly everyone does.