Notes on the Program
By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Celebrating Sondheim

Stephen Sondheim has towered over his era of American musical theater as both a lyricist and a composer — very often as both at once. His career so far has encompassed a string of 15 full-scale musicals plus a handful of “anthology shows” built on numbers cut from shows; a stack of scores for film, television, and theater productions; a body of stand-alone songs and instrumental pieces; and a portfolio of librettos and lyrics matched by none of his contemporaries. His principal contributions to musical theater now stretch back 65 years, and yet they seem for the most part fresh and still young. Each of his major works has been groundbreaking in its way, each unique; yet most exude a universality that makes them seem up to date.

Sondheim is a New Yorker born and bred, an only child who lived his early years at the San Remo on Central Park West. But his family unraveled when he was ten, and a few years later he entered the orbit of what would become a surrogate family, that of the distinguished lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II. Hammerstein provided Sondheim an entrée to Broadway by hiring him as an assistant for the premiere production of Allegro, which opened in 1947. By that time, however, Sondheim was already deeply engaged in musical studies. In 1950 he graduated from Williams College, where he was encouraged by one of his teachers, the composer Joaquín Nin-Culmell, to pursue further studies as a private pupil of Milton Babbitt. In Babbitt’s studio, Sondheim worked his way through scores by such composers as Mozart, Beethoven, Copland, and Ravel. (In 1952 he even composed a piano concerto, the first movement of which he titled Letters from Aaron Copland to Maurice Ravel.) Although Babbitt was famous for a rigorous brand of serial composition, he had nourished aspirations for popular music early in his career, and he supported Sondheim’s interest in musical theater while helping fine-tune his ability as a composer. “I am his maverick,” Sondheim would later say, “his one student who went into the popular arts armed with all his serious artillery.”

Sondheim was well prepared when opportunity knocked. Following some work on Hollywood film and television projects, he got a big break in 1957, when he was invited to serve as lyricist for Leonard Bernstein’s West Side Story. He confirmed his place among Broadway’s elect two years later when he triumphed as the wordsmith for Jule Styne’s Gypsy. Within a few years, Sondheim launched a series of Broadway shows for which he both authored the words and composed the music, in every case infusing sophistication into language that could be embraced by general theatergoers.

In Short

Stephen Sondheim

Born: March 22, 1930, in New York City
Resides: in New York City

Taking a bow at the New York Philharmonic’s Sondheim: The Birthday Concert, March 2010
Following the first two of his shows to reach the Great White Way — the ever-delightful *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962, an original riposte to Roman Classical comedies), and subtly constructed *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964) — Sondheim arrived at the six works he developed in association with producer and director Harold Prince: *Company* (1970), a commentary on the foibles of human relationships; *Follies* (1971), a hugely inventive study of aspiration and disappointment in show business and personal life; *A Little Night Music* (1973), a charmed but bittersweet glimpse of midsummer romance; *Pacific Overtures* (1976), a Zen-infused masterpiece on the unlikely subject of Japanese-American political relations; *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979), a macabre “musical thriller”; and *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), a daring exploration of how the idealism of youth yields to the cynicism of adulthood — told in reverse. Merely naming these shows underscores how the composer was given to perpetual exploration, never reiterating a familiar plot, never retracing a conceptual formula he had already plumbed.

These characteristics have carried through works produced in the decades since: *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), which brings the act of artistic creativity radiantly alive; *Into the Woods* (1986), which delves into children’s fables, and beyond them deep into the human psyche; *Assassins* (1990), a startling show focusing on a slender niche of criminality — nine successful or unsuccessful murderers of United States presidents; *Passion* (1994), the love story of a soldier and his commander’s sickly cousin; and the show that so far has developed through three separate identities as *Wise Guys*, *Bounce*, and *Roadshow* (a meditation on gambling, business speculation, and the reversal of fortune). Rounding out the roster of Sondheim musicals are the two that achieved their fame belatedly: *The Frogs* (a musical version of Aristophanes’s comedy; it was first heard at Yale in 1974 and reached Lincoln Center three decades later), and *Saturday Night* (a tale of aspiring

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**Comedy Tonight from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum***

**Suite from *Into the Woods***

**Suite from *Assassins***

**Multitudes of Amys, from *Company***

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**Works composed and premiered:**


**New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances:** This performance marks the first of Comedy Tonight from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum; Multitudes of Amys, from Company; and the Suite from *Assassins. Suite from *Into the Woods, most recently performed in its Philharmonic premiere, January 29, 2013, Andrew Litton, conductor
young men on “date night,” written in 1954 but not produced until 1997).

This festive program opens with an orchestral version of Comedy Tonight, the irresistible number that sets the stage for A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. The show had already gone through two different opening numbers as it was developed. Choreographer and director Jerome Robbins was called in as a consultant and, according to Sondheim, “his first piece of advice was to change the opening number,” which he ended up staging. Sondheim continued: “The result, Comedy Tonight, which I wrote over the weekend, changed what had been a catastrophe in New Haven and Washington into a three-year hit on Broadway.”

Comedy Tonight and the suites from Into the Woods and Sweeney Todd performed in this concert have been arranged by Don Sebesky. A composer, arranger, and conductor, Sebesky’s credits include many notable theater productions in London’s West End and on Broadway, among them the 2000 revival of Kiss Me, Kate, which earned him a Tony Award for Best Orchestration, and the 2015 An American in Paris (for which he shared a Tony Award for Best Orchestration). His work has figured in numerous film and television productions, commercials, and a host of recordings, including the 1991 Symphonic Sondheim (in which he conducted the London Symphony Orchestra). Sebesky is also the arranger for Multitudes of Amys, from Company. The song, heard here in an instrumental version, was originally intended for the central character, Robert (Bobby to his friends), to sing as the finale, but it was replaced early in the show’s development when a change in the narrative rendered

Suites from Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street
Night Waltz from A Little Night Music
Selections from Follies
Suite from Sunday in the Park with George


New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances: Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street premiered in a staged version May 4, 2000, Andrew Litton, conductor; most recently performed in a staged version March 8, 2014, Alan Gilbert, conductor. This performance marks the premiere of Night Waltz from A Little Night Music, and the Suite from Sunday in the Park with George. Selections from Follies, premiered September 6, 1985, as part of a concert performance of the complete show, Paul Gemignani, conductor, Barbara Cook (Losing My Mind) and Lee Remick (Could I Leave You?), vocalists; Losing My Mind, most recently performed March 15, 2010, as part of Sondheim: The Birthday Concert, Paul Gemignani, conductor, Marin Mazzie, vocalist; Could I Leave You?, most recently performed February 14, 2015, Ted Sperling, conductor, Laura Osnes, vocalist.
Along with numerous performances of individual songs and suites from his musicals, the New York Philharmonic has mounted complete performances of three of Stephen Sondheim’s greatest works: *Follies* (in 1985), *Sweeney Todd* (twice, in 2000 and 2014), and *Company* (2011). In each case, marquee names from Broadway, film, and television shared the stage with the full Orchestra, showcasing the true power of Sondheim’s music.

*Follies in Concert* brought together a star-studded cast, including Barbara Cook, George Hearn, Lee Remick, Mandy Patinkin, Elaine Stritch, Carol Burnett, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green, among others. The one-night only event achieved legendary status through subsequent release of the live recording, which was the first complete album of the musical’s score (production cutbacks had caused some songs to be dropped from the 1971 original Broadway cast recording).

Lonny Price, who directs this evening’s performance, helmed the Orchestra’s two award-winning productions of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. The recording of the 2000 production, starring George Hearn and Patti LuPone, was nominated for a Grammy; the 2014 staging, starring Bryn Terfel and Emma Thompson, won an Emmy for the *Live From Lincoln Center* broadcast, and the production transferred to London’s English National Opera. Price also directed the Philharmonic’s 2011 production of *Company*. Neil Patrick Harris, who had made his Philharmonic debut as Tobias in the 2000 *Sweeney Todd*, led another glittering cast; his Robert brought along friends including Patti LuPone and Stephen Colbert.

— The Editors

From top: The showgirls, from *Follies in Concert*, 1985: Liliane Montevecchi, Betty Comden, Elaine Stritch, Phyllis Newman, Lee Remick, and Barbara Cook; Anika Noni Rose, Christina Hendricks, and Jill Paice in *Company*, 2011; Audra McDonald appeared as The Beggar Woman in both of the Orchestra’s *Sweeney Todd* productions; George Hearn and Patti LuPone in *Sweeney Todd*, 2000
it no longer relevant. “I’m sorry to say that this song never got as far as rehearsal,” Sondheim explained in his book *Finishing the Hat*. “It’s one of my favorites.”

Michael Starobin, who created the suites from *Assassins* and *Sunday in the Park with George*, is an acclaimed Broadway orchestrator, arranger, composer, and musical director. *Sunday in the Park with George* was, in fact, the first Broadway show for which he provided orchestrations, and it won him the 1984 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Orchestrations. He has received two Tony Awards for Best Orchestrations — one for *Assassins* (2004), the other for the musical *Next to Normal* (2009, awarded jointly with the show’s composer, Tom Kitt). His Sondheimian bona fides extend to orchestrating the 2010 revue *Sondheim on Sondheim*, which won both Drama Desk and Drama League Awards.

Jonathan Tunick — orchestrator, composer, music director — is a rare EGOT, one of few who have earned all four show-biz top-trophy awards: an Oscar (for contributions to *A Little Night Music*), Tony (*Titanic*), Emmy (*Night of 100 Stars*), and Grammy (his arrangement of *No One is Alone*, from *Into the Woods* recorded by Cleo Laine). He has been involved in some 80 theatrical productions and some 35 films, but he is most associated with the works of Sondheim. He has been an essential part of the team for 13 Sondheim shows — indeed, sometimes seeing them through multiple revisions or transformations from stage to screen. In 2009 he was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame. His arrangements of the Night Waltz from *A Little Night Music* and selections from *Follies* are heard tonight.

The swelling strains of the Night Waltz from *A Little Night Music* evoke the mood for a show composed mostly in waltz rhythms. *Losing My Mind* is sung in *Follies* by Sally, one of the former showgirls who have gathered for a reunion decades after the glory days of their former careers. She still nurtures her youthful infatuation for Ben, who is attending the reunion with his wife, Phyllis. “One of the pleasures of writing is noting how a single small word can change or intensify the emotional tone of what is being said (or sung),” Sondheim observed. He cites a passage from this song: “I dim the lights / And think about you. / Spend sleepless nights / To think about you.” He continued:

For example, using the word “to” instead of “and” ... takes Sally a step further into her obsession with Ben and offers a nice example of the subtle powers of the English language. As I keep saying, God is in the details.

*Could I Leave You?* is sung by Phyllis; here she lights into her husband, who has asked her to divorce him ... and she leaves the question unresolved.

**Multitudes of Honors**

Stephen Sondheim is among the most honored of figures in the landscape of American culture. Grammy Awards, Tony Awards, and Drama Desk Awards have come his way many times, and in 1990 he won an Academy Award for his song *Sooner or Later (I Always Get my Man)*, from *Dick Tracy*. He was elected into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1983, received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1985 for *Sunday in the Park with George*, and in 1993 he was recognized for lifetime achievement by the Kennedy Center Honors. In November 2015, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama. A profound tribute came from Broadway itself when, in 2010, Henry Miller’s Theatre on West 43rd Street was renamed the Stephen Sondheim Theatre.