

Performance Treatise for “I Didn’t Know What Time it Was” from Too Many Girls by Richard
Rodgers and Lorenz Hart
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Music 203 Performance Styles and Practices
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I. BACKGROUND

The song "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" entered the American radio sound waves on September 13, 1939, charting on October 28 for thirteen weeks with a top spot of number six. Columbia released a studio version of Benny Goodman's orchestration with vocals by Louise Tobin a month before the premiere of *Too Many Girls*, the musical which the song belonged to.¹ Richard Rodgers' and Lorenz Hart's musical premiered on October 18, 1939 at the Imperial Theatre, playing there until April 21, 1940 and transferring to the Broadway Theatre the next day, playing until May 18, 1940, for a healthy total of 249 performances.² Meanwhile, Rodgers and Hart prepared the show for a full feature movie to be produced by RKO Radio Pictures. The movie premiered in the U.S. on October 8, 1940 and Europe and South America the following year.³

The story came from a book by George Marion Jr. who for twenty-seven years wrote books and screenplays that were brought to the screen such as *The Gay Divorcee*. Marion wrote a feel-good story in *Too Many Girls*, one that didn't intend to make any statements. It centers around the problem of a young, wild heiress, Consuelo Casey, only child of a business tycoon, Harvey Casey. After a disastrous time in Europe, she informs her father she would like to attend Pottawatomie College in New Mexico. This plan hides her real reason: to follow a famous writer she met in Europe. Her father hires four football stars from four Ivy League schools that he

¹ Jeremy Wilson, "Jazz Standards Songs and Instrumentals (I Didn't Know What Time It Was)," JazzStandards.com, accessed December 19, 2016, <http://www.jazzstandards.com/compositions-0/idadntknowwhattimeitwas.htm>.

² "Too Many Girls – Broadway Musical – Original | IBDB," IBDB | The Official Source For Broadway Information, accessed December 19, 2016, <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/too-many-girls-13187>.

³ "Too Many Girls (1940) - Release Info," IMDb, accessed December 19, 2016, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0033173/releaseinfo?ref_=tt_dt_dt.

meets in the summer at a resort to be secret bodyguards and to keep her out of trouble. They must of course sign a hands-off contract, but one of them falls in love with Consuelo, a mutually felt sentiment. When they finally come together, Consuelo sings “I Didn’t Know What Time it Was.”

II. LYRICS

Verse 1

Once I was young,
yesterday, perhaps.
Danced with Jim and Paul
and kissed some other chaps.
Once I was young,
but never was naive.
I thought I had a trick or two
up my imaginary sleeve.
And now I know I was naive.

Refrain

I didn't know what time it was
then I met you.
Oh, what a lovely time it was,
How sublime it was too!
I didn't know what day it was
You held my hand.
Warm like the month of May it was,
And I'll say it was grand.

Grand to be alive, to be young,
to be mad, to be yours alone!
Grand to see your face, feel your touch,
hear your voice say I'm all your own.

I didn't know what time it was
live was no prize.
I wanted love and here it was
shining out of your eyes.
I'm wise,
and I know what time it is now.

Lorenz Hart wrote a second verse obviously to be sung by the male lead character, but it doesn't appear in the movie in which Rodgers and Hart had full artistic control. Proof of whether they included the second verse in the Broadway staging in 1939-1940 remains hidden.

Verse 2

Once I was old,
 twenty years or so.
 Rather well preserved,
 the wrinkles didn't show.
 Once I was old,
 but not too old for fun.
 I used to hunt for little girls
 with my imaginary gun.
 But now I aim for only one!

In Rodgers' autobiography, he tells of Hart's concept for the song. "Because our story dealt, more or less, with an institution of learning, in "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" he came up with the idea of discovering both love and wisdom, and in "Love Never Went to College" he personified love as an ignorant but all-powerful ruler."⁴

Hart used what was supposedly a colloquial phrase in the title, a trend in songwriting of the day. Other 1930s jargon include "grand," and "mad." Grand refers to something wonderful, not size. Mad refers to being impassioned, not angry. The figurative language "trick up my imaginary sleeve" twists the usual "trick up my sleeve" which means having a secret plan, derived from card playing or magic shows, with the word "imaginary." Whatever trick she thought she had, she had no sleeve to hide it. Wilder, who wrote *American Popular Song The Great Innovators, 1900-1950*, credits Hart's "remarkably sensitive ear for the best of street speech" for the success of Hart's lyrics.⁵

⁴ Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1975), 192.

⁵ Alec Wilder and James T. Maher, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), .

The first verse and refrain reveal a state of honest confession, of discovery, and unabashed reactions. She admits out loud that how she fit into the world before doesn't accommodate her growth. She sees and understands more things and regrets that she hadn't noticed the world accurately before. The lyrics paint an ideal, gentle love that can only be detected by looking for it as opposed to waiting for an obvious sign.

The second verse answers the first verse with a joke. If one was old at a certain time in the past, one would become older with time. Only adolescents and younger would rate the age of twenty as old. But since she said she was young, he had to be contrary and say he is old. As for the concept of hunting for little girls, what would it have been for? His words conjure an unlikely event, a tease. The word "imaginary" matches the first verse, toying with their newfound love and budding relationship.

III. LORENZ HART

Most lyricists have a special connection with their words. Hart suffered from a variety of dwarfism which made his body proportions seem unnatural to people. Though he could be affable and gregarious when sober, his appearance prevented romantic involvement. The 1930s social agenda did not focus on accepting different shapes of people, especially in the entertainment industry. To further his unpopularity, he was homosexual and a Jew. Hart reacted to the treatment he received by internalizing his pain and turning to alcohol. He would disappear for long periods of time. This frustrated Rodgers and forced Rodgers to write some of the lyrics for one of the songs in *Too Many Girls*. Hart's absences increased during the creative period for this show. In the front of the Rodgers and Hart songbook, Rodgers' wife Dorothy explains that

Rodgers had to compose the music first and when Hart would show up, stay in the room with him to make sure he worked.

Hart's troubled psychology didn't turn off when he needed to write lyrics. A tinge of sadness or bitterness needles its way into Hart's work, even in a love song. Considering this dimension of dolor, Hart's songs can't be sung with abandon. Singers must sing as if a double *entendre* abides in each word, phrase, and line. The vocal line and text should never sound as if it were merely a simple song. Marmorstein writes in his biography of Hart that "'I Didn't Know What Time It Was' is one of Rodgers' most beautiful melodies, but its beauty also derives from the lyric's arc, from self-delusion and befuddlement to clarity and contentment."⁶

IV. RICHARD RODGERS

Rodgers could invent an entrancing melody and set it too enriching harmonies with only a concept of the character, scene, or situation within the scene.⁷ His tunes and bass lines enticed instrumentalists with their elegance and solid form, inspiring countless musicians to adopt them into their repertory. The songs Rodgers wrote during his symbiotic relationship with Hart account for a large portion of the Great American Songbook, the make-believe hall of fame of popular songs from the early twentieth century. As with Hart's lyrics, the Rodgers' harmonic language adds dimension to the simplest melodies. In "I Didn't Know What Time It Was," the melody consists of many repeated notes, line after line, that would result in monotony, except that Rodgers' harmonies create push and pull. He further dramatizes the tension between melody and counter notes by the pacing of harmonic rhythm. The refrain begins with a long note that

⁶ Gary Marmorstein, *A Ship Without a Sail: The Life of Lorenz Hart* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), Kindle, 351.

⁷ James Day, "Day at Night: Richard Rodgers," YouTube, 1971, <https://youtu.be/3af0A-cgfdE>.

could go nowhere but the bass line drops, forcing the singer to work harder to maintain the pitch of the long note. If the singer could be swayed by the falling interval beneath, the tune would lose its character.

Even after Rodgers outlines a melody and then Hart writes the lyrics, there must be some adjustments made together. Taking the meaning of the words into account, Rodgers keeps the tonality in question, until the word “wise” at the end of the song when the character has a revelation. The tonic chord plays periodically in the song but not in a cadential setting to rest at.

K.J. McElrath states on the JazzStandards’ website:

Part of what keeps this song from becoming “tonicized” is Rodger’s choice of the 11th as the important melody note over several minor chords. Since the 11th is closely related to the interval of a fourth (being the fourth an octave higher), it is inherently unstable from a harmonic standpoint. In the “B” section, the G major harmony is heard, but the important sustained melodic tone turns out to be the 6th. While more stable than the 11th, it is less stable than the root, 3rd or 5th, and what follows (a descending scale over Am, going to B7 and ending on Em) does not serve to strengthen the sense of G tonality. It is especially important to have a thorough knowledge of the tune’s “head” and to find as many guide tone lines as possible.⁸

⁸ K.J. McElrath, "Jazz Standards Songs and Instrumentals (I Didn't Know What Time It Was)," *Jazz Standards Introduction: Origins, History, Theory, Musicology, Biographies, and Books*, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.jazzstandards.com/compositions-0/ididntknowwhattimeitwas.htm>.

Rodgers and Hart wrote another song for *Too Many Girls* that addresses an irritation of theirs. “I Like to Recognize the Tune” expresses how they feel about the extreme liberties jazz musicians would take with their songs.

... we voice objection to the musical distortions then so much a part of pop music because of the swing-band influence. We really had nothing against swing bands per se, but as songwriters we felt it was tough enough for new numbers to catch on as written without being subjected to all kinds of interpretive manhandling that obscured their melodies and lyrics. To me, this was the musical equivalent of bad grammar. On the other hand, once a song has become established I see nothing wrong with taking certain liberties. A singer or an orchestra can add a distinctive, personal touch that actually contributes to a song's longevity. I can't say I'm exactly grief-stricken when something I've written years before suddenly catches on again because of a new interpretation.⁹

Rodgers compositions exemplify the differences in the feel of a working relationship with the lyricist. The inner understanding of each other's whims infuse their words and music with a distinct personality. Rodgers' melodies with Oscar Hammerstein II sound different from his melodies with Hart.

In the days when media could only be heard live, on the radio, or on record players, songs from musicals didn't pass the theater doors. If a musical were popular enough, sheet music would be printed for home enjoyment, but for a song to gain momentum in the bigger public, it would need to be performed by a well-known musician or band. In the last eight decades,

⁹ Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1975), 193.

popular artists and bands have recorded “I Didn’t Know What Time It Was” as a simple search on a streaming music service will show.

V. EXAMPLE RECORDINGS

Lucille Ball played the character Consuelo Casey in the movie version of *Too Many Girls* but was dubbed by Trudy Erwin on the songs. This movie “was the only film made out of a Rodgers and Hart play over which Larry and Dick had artistic control.”¹⁰ The important aspect to listen to in the movie version of this song is the orchestration and tempo. Gentle balance, calm tempo, and subtle rhythmic elements direct attention to the soft pleading in the lyrics and to the melody that ask for understanding. Some recordings obliterate the intimacy of the moment the song begs to create by ignoring the three key principles. The accompaniment, whether orchestral, piano, or ensemble, must balance its presence and never detract from the melody by keeping check of volume, notes, and accents. Margaret Whiting, Jo Stafford, Julie London, and Dinah Shore have made recordings that keep this balance of a ballad. The second point, tempo, controls mood. Take this song too fast and you become a flippant performer. I’ve never heard this song too slow so there must be an inherent property that prevents that. If the musicians can be “in tune” with the mood and meaning of the song, the right tempo will find itself. The opposite will also be true. The arrangement should choose a rhythmic style that reflects the intent of the song. Recordings by Ella Fitzgerald, Kiri Te Kanawa, or Peggy Lee have stylized rhythms that add a flavor without sacrificing the melodic line. Other recordings have attempted versions based on *bossa nova*, the shuffle, Motown, or more that contort the intent. The Supremes, Dorothy

¹⁰ Dorothy Hart, *Thou Swell, Thou Witty: The Life and Lyrics of Lorenz Hart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 141.

Dandridge, and Bobby Darin edge close to forcing the song into an upbeat, happy-go-lucky song that it isn't. These arrangements ignore the quiet petition of the singer to be understood. Their agenda is to direct attention to their style or adaptation. One of the most egregious examples of distorting the song can be found in Nnenna Freelon's recording. The percussive elements pound at the child-like apprehension and her stuttering glottal yell on the word "I" demolish all subtleties in what should be a long-held, meaningful note.

Studying multiple recordings aid the performer's approach in how to best respect and serve the song. Listening to many and taking notes on favorable or nonexemplary aspects at the first listening and then again after learning the song can deepen the performer's artistry. And if on the second listening, a different opinion sets in, the reason will be clear.

VI. PRONUNCIATION

American English has its own sound. Recordings from New Englanders have a wide /a/ sound, recordings from Midwesterners have a twinge of drawl and slow diphthongs, whereas more cosmopolitan singers have "movie" English – a "nonaccented" pronunciation. Retired opera singers have vowels that are too pure and sound stilted on an American pop classic. Singers should sing this song in the manner of conversation. Whatever accent a singer has, it should be used, as a more natural sound will result without having to be studied or restrained in the delivery. Artificial accents will flatten inflections inherent in easy conversation. A sentence in unstressed speech has a flow, a continuity. That essence makes a ballad like "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" be performed successfully. Without the natural melding of syllables, the song lands stiff on the ear, making the listener feel something is amiss.

Vowels allow music to be heard, consonants allow words to be understood. Popular music can tolerate regional vowel differences, even inner-city urban sounds. Mumbling on any count cannot be tolerated and the same goes for over enunciation. Consonants are a miniature world to themselves. A lot can happen in the event of a consonant. Every consonant has percussive power to add dimension, body, breadth, spring, and regeneration to a musical line. The fade of a vowel to the onset of the consonant provides a wide canvas for artistry. Should there be a glide, an elision, a click, a break? How much press in the lips, the tongue, the teeth, the subglottal area, and the vocal cords will be the infinitesimally right amount? The lines in this song weren't created to just make a voice sound pretty. The design of the lines lay open an opportunity to make magic. On a picky point, never do these things: 1) put a /ch/ sound between "met" and "you," or between "what" and "year;" 2) elide "was" and "no" to make "snow:" 3) leave the /th/ off "with" to end up with "wi;" and 4) forget the "ed" endings of verbs. Find the playground in every consonant.

Practice speaking each line in a conversational manner, or in particular with a tone and intent of a confession. Memorize the lyrics, especially non-native speakers. Record your monologue and ask a friend whether they can understand every word. Once these lyrics can be spoken well, sing them, keeping as much of the timing as allowable in the melody. None of the eighth notes need to be divisibly accurate. "Danced with Jim and Paul and kissed some other chaps" would have a slight pause after "with" and after "Paul," singing "Jim and Paul" in one unit and then the rest of the words in another unit. The printed note values serve as references. Each note can begin a fraction early or late. Too many notes metrically on the beat will convey awkward timing. There can be some play at the barlines for the melody, but not for the

accompaniment. A sense of timing coordinates with consonants and vowels to produce a recording worthy of hundreds of repetition.

VII. APPAREL

Clothing will depend on venue. When the clothes match the event, the performers will feel more comfortable. At a nightclub, dress elegantly but not formal, and wear jewelry that can reflect some light. Hair should be done nicely showing effort at grooming. At a political or awards convention, dress formally from toenail to eyelash and full-on coiffed do. At an outdoor summer festival, wear enough clothes to be dressed a little bit more than the crowd. Having a measure of elevation in clothing style will keep the musicians feeling like special performers.

VII. MICROPHONE TECHNIQUE

For the most part, this song will be performed with a microphone. Practice holding a mic when practicing, they get heavier than expected. Press it to your chin until your arm no longer drops. Hold the microphone at an angle that matches the trajectory of sound exiting the mouth. Watch yourself in the mirror often. Beginners tend to hold the mic like a torch and drop it away from the mouth. Film yourself and watch how you do. Watch samples of excellent mic technique. Wherever the face looks, the mic must follow, never losing the sound stream from the mouth. If working with a mic in a stand, avoid jutting the head forward. Set the mic in the stand to come towards you. Do not sacrifice posture to be close to the mic. Learn to move the body without moving the mouth away from the mic. The head and the body can tilt and sway as long as the mouth and mic connection is the pivot point. For theatrical effect, you can move the mic stand, but this song doesn't suggest that sort of drama.

VIII. EXPRESSION

The face separates a good performer from a not-so-good performer. A fabulous recording artist can be quite dreadful live. The face must reflect the meaning of each descriptive word. If you think of the meaning of each word and let that thought direct your facial muscles to respond, they will naturally. If you try to make your face reflect a direction such as “look innocent,” often times it will come across as over acting. Over acting robs the moment of honesty. People respond to the minutest changes in muscle movement on the face. Some of the muscles on the face are the size of a thread. Think of the range of expression possible and multiply that with the rate of change. Expression wields the power to connect with the audience, to get them to care about the song and about you the performer. A mediocre singer who can emote will win over a crowd. The time you spend believing that you can emote and trusting your ability to express will be priceless.

IX. KEY

Considering every point discussed up to now, how best can they be shown by the singer? The song has a range of a ninth. The high note at the word “grand” provides an emotional climax but it doesn’t serve the purpose of being a technical highlight such as an operatic high note. To key the song to encourage the right warmth in tone, set the lowest note of the song on the word “your” in the second-to-last line “shining out of your eyes,” to the lowest clean note in your voice. Practice on this key, releasing all throat and chest tension, so the sound can resound throughout your entire lung cavity. The microphone will pick up on the expanse of your

resonance. You can't be tight, anywhere. The key should make you feel as though you are entering a hot bath.

X. CONCLUSION

When a performer puts forth effort to understand the genesis and germination of a song, the situation of its creation, and the personal traits of its creators, their performance will touch on the deepest respect they can offer the song. "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" stands worthy of that respect. Showing that respect shows gratitude to Rodgers and Hart for their work. I hope this song will thrive for the next century for it exhibits emotions elementary to the human spirit.

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