

# THE MARRIAGE OF NOTE AND WORD IN TWO SONGS BY THE GERSHWINS

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[EDITOR'S NOTE: During 13–16 March 1998, the Library of Congress held a four-day symposium on “The Gershwins and Their World,” to celebrate the opening of its George and Ira Gershwin Room (and the centennial of George's birth). On Sunday, 15 March, Allen Forte delivered two different papers, “Reflections on the Connection between George Gershwin and Alban Berg,” and “The Musical Marriage of Note and Word: Two Songs by the Gershwins.” A version of the former was published the following year in *Musical Quarterly*.<sup>1</sup> Around the same time, a version of the latter was contributed to a proposed collection of essays on popular music of the era, intended for the musically literate general reader. That collection failed to materialize, however, and so—for about a dozen years—the essay has remained tucked away in a folder. At my request, the author agreed to have it published as a special feature of this Festschrift dedicated to him.

Readers familiar with Forte's work on this repertory will know that the first of the two songs addressed here—“How Long Has This Been Going On?”—had already been discussed in his 1995 book, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era: 1924–1950*. It was later examined in his 2001 book, *Listening to Classic American Popular Songs*.<sup>2</sup> The present commentary intersects with both of these sources (especially the latter), but it is not identical to either. The second song—“Who Cares”—has not been discussed elsewhere by Forte.]

I would like to begin by reviewing the musical theater origin of the first of the two songs I will be discussing, “How Long Has This Been Going On?” After having been dropped from *Funny Face* in 1927, the song appeared in *Rosalie* a year later and was one of the three Gershwin songs published from it (other music having been written by Sigmund Romberg). In both shows, “How Long Has This Been Going On?” is sung in response to a first kiss, and the lyrics express the sweet delight and wonderment of the singer at this rite of passage. As I will show, the beauty of the lyrics and melody extends to the topography of the song as well.

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<sup>1</sup> [Allen Forte, “Reflections upon the Gershwin–Berg Connection,” *Musical Quarterly* 83/2 (1999): 150–168. —ED.]

<sup>2</sup> [See Allen Forte, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era: 1924–1950* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), 156–161; and *Listening to Classic American Popular Songs* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 44–54. —ED.]

“How Long Has This Been Going On?” was the only song from *Rosalie* that became famous, but that happened long after the show had closed, after it was recorded by Lee Wiley in 1939 (with the Max Kaminsky Orchestra) and Peggy Lee in 1941 (with Benny Goodman’s band). In the years since, the song has been performed often, and it has been recorded by many famous singers—notably by Ella Fitzgerald, whose recording (with Nelson Riddle’s arrangement) many regard as definitive. Other singers of an older generation, who have what those in the academy might characterize as an “eclectic” approach to interpretation, include Sarah Vaughan and Ray Charles. This tradition continues with more recent singers of a pop-rock orientation. For example, Elaine Paige, B. J. Crosby, and Spider Saloff include the song in their repertoires. And in 1994 Jon Bon Jovi recorded the song, refrain only, very slowly, with a constant triplet rhythmic background, in blues-shouting style, accompanied by octogenarian Larry Adler on harmonica. This extraordinary and effective performance includes extensive reharmonization that would raise the question of “authenticity” in the ears of many connoisseurs of this repertoire. Similarly, in Maureen McGovern’s 1988 recording, made with excellent players and a state-of-the-art arrangement, we hear a reharmonization of the bridge, while the song ends with a modern-day cliché: a change of key up a half step, after the release. But in a very effective innovation, McGovern sings the verse mostly unaccompanied. As far as I know, the “cross-overs” have kept “How Long Has This Been Going On?” on the other side of the street, but I am sure it will not be long before we have wonderful recordings from these fine performers, too.

I mention these variegated performances to reinforce the point that this song, like so many by the Gershwins, is not a museum piece; it is living music. Indeed, the first part of this essay attempts to answer the question “Why has ‘How Long Has This Been Going On’ been going on so long?”

FIGURE 1. “How Long Has This Been Going On”: refrain, mm. 1–8

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff contains measures 1 through 4, and the second staff contains measures 5 through 8. The lyrics are written below the notes, with some words split across measures. Measure numbers 1 through 8 are indicated above the notes.

1 I could cry \_\_\_ salt-y tears; \_\_\_ 2 3 Where have I been all these years? \_\_\_ 4  
 5 Lit-tle wow, \_\_\_ 6 tell me now \_\_\_ 7 how long has this been going on? \_\_\_ 8

FIGURE 2. “How Long Has This Been Going On”: lyrics (refrain, mm. 1–8)

A	a	I could cry
	b	Salty tears;
A	a	Where have I
	b	Been all these years?
A'	c	Little wow,
	c	Tell me now[:]
B	d	How long has this been going on?

First let us consider the lyrics, as shown in Figure 1. Ira Gershwin catches us off guard with his whimsical beginning line: “I could cry salty tears.” What other kind are there? Did they have salt-free tears in those days? The second line, “Where have I been all these years?,” is set by the insistent quarter-note pattern of “Where have I been,” after which the melody drops for the three notes that end the line, setting “all these years” in a syncopated pattern that exactly matches the rhythm of “I could cry” and “salty tears.” The third line of the lyrics, “Little wow, tell me now,” continues the three-note rhythmic pattern, presenting it twice. Then, in a striking change, the first part of the final line (“how long has this been”) introduces the series of short–long, jazz-derived patterns that blends into the final three-note syncopation of “going on,” which was the first rhythm in the song. Thus, the entire rhythmic pattern consists of only three elements: the syncopated and insouciant three-note pattern at the beginning and end, the insistent

four-note group (“Where have I been”), and the short–long interrogative succession that sets the beginning of the title phrase, “How long has this been.”

Let us turn now to the *design* of the lyrics at the beginning of the refrain. Up to the final line, each line occupies one bar of music, filling what is known as the standard eight-bar period. As shown in Figure 2, the first four lines pair off as *ab/ab*. Lines 5 and 6 introduce the new end rhymes “wow” and “now,” in preparation for the first word in the song’s title, “How,” which is a beautiful touch and very characteristic of Ira’s subtle manipulations of rhyme. Unfortunately, he did not explain the expression “little wow” in this context, leaving its meaning open to speculation by future generations of scholars. The regular scheme of two-line pairs breaks down with the new short–long rhythm of the seventh and final line, which sets it off from the preceding six, so that many listeners will hear the AAA'B design shown in Figure 2. This pattern is closely related to the AAB succession of the traditional barform, of which the twelve-bar blues is a closely related and familiar exemplar. Like in the blues, the three musical units marked A on Figure 2 culminate in the final line, creating a sense of completion—or near-completion in this case, as I will explain in a moment. Melodically, the final line is set with a stock blues figure, virtually identical to Jerome Kern’s setting of “lovin’ dat man of mine” in “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man,” composed for *Show Boat* in the same year as Gershwin’s “How Long Has This Been Going On?”<sup>3</sup>

Now to the notes of the melody, which may be just as important as the words! It is difficult to imagine a melodic configuration more *unlike* that of the model ballad of the period. As an extreme comparison, consider the graceful, aria-like contours of Kern’s famous song, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” written in 1933. Gershwin’s melody, in contrast, seems laconic, even frag-

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Michael Campbell for drawing this similarity to my attention.

**FIGURE 3.** Scalar basis of melody (pentatonic)

mentary, originating probably in an instrumental improvisation. To enter the interrogatory mode of the lyrics, and setting aside the verbal component for the moment, I ask: How is the melodic design unified to become a whole (if, indeed, it is)? An inventory of the notes of the melody provides a partial answer.

The melody of the first three bars uses only two notes, D and E. Two new notes, G and A, enter in m. 4 on “all these years.” Measure 6 (“tell me now how”) brings back notes D and E, an octave lower, and the first part of m. 7 returns G and A, so that up to this point only four notes are in play, formed by the pairs D–E and G–A. This circumstance changes radically with the setting of “going on?” at the end of m. 8. There the syllable “go-” is sung on B $\flat$ , a blue note, and the last note of the bar is the diatonicized twin of B $\flat$ , B $\natural$ . If we regard the blue note as a special embellishing note, the basic inventory of notes for the opening music of “How Long Has This Been Going On?” then consists of the five-note scalar array shown in Figure 3. To quote Ira’s lyric later in the song, “What a break! For heaven’s sake”: the five notes in Figure 3 form a pentatonic scale, with all that that suggests, and it suggests a great deal. In the most general sense, it suggests a strong link to American song traditions, through Stephen Foster (e.g., “Camptown Races”) and beyond to the folk and religious music of African Americans. The pentatonic component of so many American popular songs of the Gershwin era is as American as apple pie, not to mention bagels and lox, and black-eyed peas with collard greens.

In context, however, Gershwin’s presentation of the pentatonic is purely idiosyncratic, and that is made clear by the one basic component of the song I have not yet touched upon: its

FIGURE 4. “How Long Has This Been Going On”: refrain

(a) opening chords (mm. 1–2)

(b) notes of chord #1

harmony. In Figure 4a I have notated the first two chords. It is these opening chords that must have attracted the attention of musicians when they first heard the song, for they are really wonderful sonorities. The first is pure Americana, state-of-the-art harmony, perhaps originating with Gershwin: a high-powered ninth chord with seventh and sixth. If, however, we unroll it to display its notes in a horizontal array, as shown in Figure 4b, we can see that it relates in the most perfect way to the melody. It embeds two of the little melodic motives: the very first one, D–E (“I could cry”), is in the outer voices of the chord (see again Figure 4a), and the A–B motive that will occur at the end of m. 7 (“-ing on”) is already embedded in it as the second and third notes from the top.

The second chord in Figure 4a has a distinctly octatonic ring to it, but I will pass over what is perhaps an unfamiliar term and merely say that the pungent effect of the harmony comes from the dissonant notes in its interior.<sup>4</sup> It is the *connection* of the two harmonies that captures the ear. While the outer-voice pair D–E remains in place, the notes that move do so by descending semitone: A moves to G#, F# to Fb, and C to B. This second chord is right out of European

<sup>4</sup> [Aspects of Gershwin’s octatonicism are considered in Forte, “Reflections upon the Gershwin–Berg Connection”; see especially 158–165. —ED.]

FIGURE 5. “How Long Has This Been Going On”: harmonic progression, refrain, mm. 1–8

art music of the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> It could (and does) occur in the music of Igor Stravinsky, but of course in quite a different musical context. And it occurs in the music of Claude Debussy as a hallmark of his style.<sup>6</sup>

Before I make some final observations on the lyrics of “How Long Has This Been Going On?,” I would like to say something about the harmonic progression, by which I mean the succession of chords. In this age of triple- or single-chord progressions, it is possible that some listeners (especially those who have arrived on the planet more recently) have minimal sensitivity to the syntax of harmonic progression, and may not be aware of just how special Gershwin’s feeling was for this large-scale aspect of his music, coming as it does from traditional classical music.

Below the bass line of the song, Figure 5 provides a Roman-numeral reading of the harmonic progression. Because some readers may be unfamiliar with the jargon of tonal music theory, I will give the “bottom line” right now: the key of every tonal piece—its basic sonority—is determined by a particular harmony called the tonic harmony, which bears the same name as

<sup>5</sup> [Correspondences between harmonies employed in the cited repertory and in American popular song are explored in Allen Forte, “Harmonic Relations: American Popular Harmonies (1925–1950) and Their European Kin,” *Contemporary Music Review* 19/1 (2000): 5–36; see 25–29 for “The Octatonic Infusion.” —ED.]

<sup>6</sup> [The chord in question (the second of Figure 4a) is reducible to 5-31 (01369) in Forte’s well-known nomenclature from *The Structure of Atonal Music* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973). Stravinsky’s uses of 5-31 in *The Rite of Spring* and *The Firebird* are explored by Forte in (respectively) *The Harmonic Organization of The Rite of Spring* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), and “Harmonic Syntax and Voice Leading in Stravinsky’s Early Music,” in *Confronting Stravinsky: Man, Musician, and Modernist*, ed. Jann Pasler (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986): 95–129. Debussy’s uses are explored in Forte, “Debussy and the Octatonic,” *Music Analysis* 10/1–2 (1991): 125–169. —ED.]

the key. In this song the key is G and the tonic harmony is a G harmony, a primary function of which is to serve as a point of *arrival*, signifying *closure*. As a special musical gesture, Gershwin has designed the progression of “How Long Has This Been Going On?” in such a way that arrival on the definitive tonic harmony does not occur until the eighth bar, which is the very end of the first section of the song. The idea of a delay in the arrival of the tonic harmony of course relates to the question of “How Long” in the song’s title: an ingenious correspondence of note and word. In addition, the harmonies in the long passage that precedes the appearance of the tonic chord include one that is very idiomatic and that occurs twice, first in m. 4 and again in the penultimate bar. By “idiomatic” I mean that the chord in question, labeled  $IV^{b7}$  (or  $C^7$  in popular-music chord symbols), comes directly from the blues. By the time this song appeared, in 1927, this chord type was part of the stock-in-trade of the American popular song.

Similarly, the blue note at the end of the period (mentioned earlier) is—of course—a token of the blues. Gershwin, however, treats this first blue note in the song in a very special way. You will recall that in Figure 1 it is notated as  $B^b$  and sets the syllable “go-” in “going,” just as the end of the interrogative title approaches. When the blue note  $B^b$  is “corrected” to  $B^\natural$ , setting the word “on,” the interrogatory mode is intensified in a most striking way. What more perfect pairing of note and word? This only happens in one place in the song, at the end of the first period, mm. 7–8. At the corresponding end of the second period, in m. 15, there is no  $B^\natural$ ; the melody simply descends to the tonic note, G. I will ask you to remember the  $B^\natural$  at the end of m. 7 and in m. 8, because I will return to it later. Now, however, I will return to the lyrics to consider them from another standpoint.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I have considered the role of lyrics in the American popular song at greater length in Chapter 5 (28–35) of my book, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era*.

With lyric poetry, the main interest normally lies in the semantic aspect of the words, and only secondarily in the sonic domain (i.e., the actual sound of the words). In popular song lyrics—which may be poetic in many respects but are usually not poetry<sup>8</sup>—the sonic aspect may be much more important, simply because the words are sung to actual musical notes. It is partly for this reason that I chose to use “the marriage of note and word” in the title of this article. Like all fine lyricists—and there were not many—Ira Gershwin was sensitive to pitch, and that is clearly demonstrated in the first two bars of “How Long Has This Been Going On,” where the repeated notes of the two-note motive D–E correspond exactly to the alliterative patterns “could cry” and “-ty tears.” Ira also worked carefully with the double-rhyme scheme, the internal and end rhymes, so that “I” (in “Where have I”) matches “cry” in the first line, in pitch as well as rhythmic placement. This rhyme scheme also supports the connection between the two-note figures involving different pitches. Thus “Listen, sweet,” on the notes G and A (m. 13), matches “I repeat,” on the notes E and D (m. 14), and the D–E succession of m. 1 is now reversed to E–D. Alliteration is everywhere in this song, and everywhere manipulated with strategic artistry. In the bridge, shown in Figure 6, the inner–end rhyme pattern is not used, and the pattern of end rhymes is stretched out to an *abab* succession: “melt / hurled / felt / world,” which is a wonderful way of creating in the text the contrasting musical ideas of the new section; Figure 7 summarizes.

A couple of paragraphs back, I asked you to remember the B at the end of m. 7, which sets the lyric “on.” The special B of m. 7 returns at the beginning of the bridge (Figure 6) and is the pivotal melodic note over its first four-bar phrase, linking the key interrogatory idea of the

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<sup>8</sup> [One is reminded of Ira Gershwin’s oft-quoted remark that, because his lyrics “were arrived at by fitting words mosaically to music already composed, any resemblance [they might have] to actual poetry, living or dead, is highly improbable” (Gershwin, *Lyrics on Several Occasions* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959], foreword). —ED.]

FIGURE 6. “How Long Has This Been Going On”: bridge (mm. 17–24)

Oh, I feel that I could melt; \_\_\_ in - to Heav-en I'm hurled!  
I know how Co - lum - bus felt, \_\_\_ find - ing an-oth - er world!

FIGURE 7. “How Long Has This Been Going On”: rhymed series in bridge

"melt" "hurled" "felt" "world"

C:I<sup>7</sup> IV<sup>b7</sup> I<sup>7</sup> b:I IV<sup>+6</sup> I

song with the lyric of this middle section. Moreover, the lyric “on,” set by B at the end of m. 7, becomes “Oh,” set by B at the start of the bridge in m. 17, creating a sonic and lyrical as well as a pitch connection. Indeed, I believe that the melodic B is the determinant element in Gershwin’s choice of key for the beginning of the bridge (Figure 7). Setting B in the context of a C major-seventh chord gives it a very special aura, as the major-seventh chord, a striking harmony, was beginning to acquire a particular aesthetic value about this time. Certainly it shows up in many Gershwin songs, for example, in “I’ve Got A Crush on You” and “Who Cares” (the latter to be discussed below). Its apotheosis, however, would have to await Cole Porter and “Night and Day,” which in 1927 was still some five years away.<sup>9</sup> With all these connections the bridge

<sup>9</sup> [For more on the nature of the major-seventh chord in this repertory, see Forte, “Harmonic Relations,” 10–11, as well as sundry passages in Forte’s *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era* (e.g., 11–12) and *Listening to Classic American Popular Songs* (e.g., 11–12, 14). —ED.]

FIGURE 8. “How Long Has This Been Going On”: verse, mm. 1–16

1 G Em7 Am7 D7 G  
As a tot, when I trot - ted in lit - tle vel - vet pant - ies, \_\_\_\_\_

5 Bm6 C#7 F#7 Bm  
I was kissed by my sis - ters, my cous - ins and my aunt - ies. \_\_\_\_\_

9 Am B7 E7 Am  
Sad to tell, it was Hell, an in - fer - no worse than Dan - te's. \_\_\_\_\_

13 A7 Am D7  
So, my dear, I swore, \_\_\_\_\_ "Nev - er, nev - er - more!" \_\_\_\_\_

assumes a centric role in the song, and Ira gives it his all, with the erotic lyric “Oh, I feel that I could melt; into Heaven I’m hurled!”—erotic for that time, that is. Contemporary listeners did not need Dr. Freud to tell them what those lines implied.

Before leaving “How Long Has This Been Going On?” I would like to say a few words about the verse; see Figure 8, which provides a leadsheet for this section in its entirety. “Panties,” “aunties,” and “Dante’s”—an ingenious series of rhymes. Among the other famous lyricists, only Cole Porter and Lorenz Hart could find such witty rhymes. Further, Ira’s saucy contrast of “panties” and “aunties” with two “learned” references belongs to the category of wry and ironic humor. The first of these learned allusions is to Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, the second to Poe’s “The Raven” (“Nevermore”). Ira seemed to take great pleasure in these and other ways of mixing high- and low-class elements. For example, “Of Thee I Sing, Baby” is a perennially amusing instance of the mixture of stilted speech with the American vernacular.

The verse begins with the melodic B that began the bridge (and ended the first period, in mm. 7–8). Indeed, the verse’s first phrase is a kind of paraphrase, or even a parody, of the melody of the bridge. Sequencing up to B minor in m. 5 brings into play an even more specific reference to the refrain’s bridge. Remember that the latter was probably written after the remainder of the refrain, as that was the custom. Because B minor is the only minor tonality in the entire song, and as this is a happy song, we can assume that the minor key in verse and bridge is intended to project a mock-serious and ironic mood. It is here that the word “kissed” appears, the first reference to the keyword of the song. A similar change from major to minor can be heard in the setting of “So, my dear, I swore,” which has a major cast, followed by “Never, nevermore.” As this returns abruptly to the diatonic A minor, we sense Ira’s mock-serious intention, a specific instance of note–word correspondence in which harmony as key is the agent.



“Who Cares” is the best song from the 1931 political satire, *Of Thee I Sing*, which Steven Suskin has described as “the most important musical of its time.”<sup>10</sup> You will remember the theme song, to the title of which Ira Gershwin appended the charming touch, “baby” (as noted above). The show received the first Pulitzer Prize given to a musical; it was awarded to Ira and the librettists (George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind), not to George, who nevertheless wrote some very nice music for the production. “Who Cares” is sung twice in the show, once at an up tempo, when President Wintergreen fends off the reporters who are heckling him about Diana Devereaux, a beauty queen with whom he had been dallying before marrying his sweetheart, Mary. The reporters are urging him to satisfy public opinion by divorcing First Lady Mary in

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Suskin, *Show Tunes 1905–1991: The Songs, Shows and Careers of Broadway’s Major Composers* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1992), 131.

order to marry Diana, which is an amusing plot, however far-fetched it may seem at the present time.<sup>11</sup> Later in the show, when Wintergreen is faced with impeachment on the same grounds, the song is rendered as a slow ballad. It is the latter form that I prefer, and that is the way it is usually performed today, I believe.

“Who Cares?” was chronologically the last of the eighteen songs Gershwin included in *George Gershwin’s Song-Book* of 1932.<sup>12</sup> Dedicated to Kay Swift, this collection consists of very beautiful keyboard arrangements by the master, often with significant changes (elaborations and substitutions) of the original sheet-music harmonies. Its inclusion testifies to the high regard in which Gershwin held the song. By detaching it from the musical-comedy context in which it originally appeared, without the lyrics and the satirical plot, Gershwin reaffirmed its special musical values. Figure 9 illustrates the way in which Gershwin transformed and enhanced the music in his *Song-Book*. It shows the opening of the refrain, which sets the titular phrase, “Who cares?” As indicated in the sheet-music version of Figure 9a, the chord that introduces the tonic seventh harmony—about which I will have more to say—is a garden-variety dominant seventh chord. In the *Song-Book* version of Figure 9b, the first chord is a kind of subdominant or, more precisely, a whole-tone sonority constructed symmetrically upward from the bass F. The tonic chord, marked  $I^7$  on Figure 9b, is followed by a quasi-independent, jazzy left-hand figuration that just barely conforms to the tonic harmony sustained above it by the right hand. The harmonic experimentation that is apparent here (and in all the arrangements) is worthy of special study,

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<sup>11</sup> [There is a subtext to this remark that was clearer in 1998, when a version of the essay was delivered at the Library of Congress. Earlier that year, the relationship between President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky was made public. —ED.]

<sup>12</sup> [*George Gershwin’s Song-Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1932). A limited edition of three hundred copies, signed by the composer, was also issued that year by Random House. A more recent edition was published as *Gershwin at the Keyboard: 18 Song Hits Arranged by the Composer for Piano* (Seacaucus, NJ: Warner Bros., n.d.). —ED.]

**FIGURE 9.** “Who Cares?”: beginning of refrain

(a) sheet-music version

Figure 9(a) shows the beginning of the refrain in a sheet-music version. It consists of two measures of music in C major, 4/4 time. The first measure has a treble clef with a G4 quarter note and a bass clef with a C3 half note. The second measure has a treble clef with a G4 quarter note and a bass clef with a C3 half note. The lyrics "Who" and "cares" are written below the notes. Below the first measure is the chord symbol V<sup>7</sup> and below the second measure is I<sup>7</sup>.

(b) *George Gershwin's Song-Book* version

Figure 9(b) shows the beginning of the refrain in George Gershwin's *Song-Book* version. It consists of two measures of music in C major, 4/4 time. The first measure has a treble clef with a G4 quarter note and a bass clef with a C3 half note. The second measure has a treble clef with a G4 quarter note and a bass clef with a C3 half note. The lyrics "Who" and "cares" are written below the notes. Below the first measure is the chord symbol IV<sup>?</sup> and below the second measure is I<sup>7</sup>.

relating as it does to the question of Gershwin's evolution as a composer and to speculations as to the kind of music he would have produced had he lived beyond his thirty-eighth year. In any event, it is evident that Gershwin had a high regard for the song, and I believe its special features contributed to that opinion. Although George Gershwin himself treated “Who Cares” purely as an instrumental composition, as have many in the jazz field, it is still basically a song, with wonderful lyrics, and I am approaching it in that way here, beginning with the verse.

Figure 10 provides a leadsheet for the verse of “Who Cares”—omitted, incidentally, from the *Song-Book* arrangement. In fact, the verse is rarely performed now, perhaps because it is so long and complicated. Twenty-eight bars in length, it is a miniature song in itself, although it has several of the stylistic characteristics of musical theater verses—for example, the successive repetition of a melodic pattern at different pitch levels (sequences). Like most verses, this one

FIGURE 10. "Who Cares?": verse

1 2 3 4  
Let it rain and thun - der! Let a mil - lion firms go

5 6 7 8  
un - der! I am not con - cerned with

9 10 11 12  
Stocks and bonds that I've been burned with.

13 14 15 16  
I love you and you love me And that's how it will al - ways be, And

17 18 19 20  
noth - ing else can ev - er mean a thing.

21 22 23 24  
Who cares what the pub - lic chat - ters?

25 26 27 28  
Love's the on - ly thing that mat - ters.

was written after the refrain was completed, offering the composer an opportunity to create connections between verse and refrain (the latter shown in Figure 11), an opportunity of which the era's best songwriters often availed themselves in order to integrate verse and refrain instead of treating the verse as an arbitrary introduction. This is precisely what Gershwin did with the verse

FIGURE 11. "Who Cares?": refrain

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a common time signature (C). The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes, with some phrases extending across bar lines. Chord symbols are placed above the staff to indicate the harmonic accompaniment.

Lyrics: Who cares If the sky cares to fall in the sea? Who cares What banks fail in Yonkers? Long as you've got a kiss that conquers, Why should I care? Life is one long jubilee, So long as I care for you And you care for me.

Chord symbols: C, G+5, E7, A7, Fm, C, Dm, Em, Cdim7, Dm7, G7, C, Am7, E7, Am, Ab7, D+5, G7, C, G+5, E7, Am, D7, Ab7, C, Cdim7, Dm7, G7, A7, Dm, G7, C.

of “Who Cares?” (and other songs as well), and he did it in the most elegant and nonliteral ways. One way was to select small motives from the refrain, both melodic and harmonic, and place them in new contexts. In this process, which I call motivic transfer,<sup>13</sup> he was certainly influenced by the lyrics of the refrain, which were already in place at the time he composed the verse, as I have indicated.

From the very outset, the form of the verse is unusual. Instead of the usual eight-bar period, its first section consists of a repeated six-bar phrase. A quasi-bridge then begins in m. 13 and spans the normal eight bars, and the modified return of the first section repeats the first four bars of the opening music twice. In this way the total length of the verse attains an unusual twenty-eight bars, due precisely to the double six-bar phrases of the A section. Clearly, Gershwin wanted the verse to be a substantial preparation for the beautiful aria that follows, perhaps for theatrical reasons (as “Who Cares” is the major song in *Of Thee I Sing*, underscoring two situations loaded with satire and sentiment), but perhaps also for purely musical reasons having to do with key melodic motives in the refrain. It is the latter idea that I pursue in the sequel.

Figure 12a shows the two-note figure that occurs in m. 14 of the refrain, setting “got a” (from the famous line, “got a kiss that conquers”), and this figure acts as a springboard to the E $\flat$  (“kiss”) that is almost the highest note in the song. Eight bars later, in m. 22, the same two-note motive sets the first two syllables of “jubilee,” and the last syllable of that word is, indeed, the highest note or melodic apex of “Who Cares.” Figure 12b shows the beginning of the verse: an

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<sup>13</sup> [Forte first made reference to the repertory’s use of “motivic transferal” (as he called it then) in “Secrets of Melody: Line and Design in the Songs of Cole Porter,” *Musical Quarterly* 77/4 (1993): 607–647; see the section on “Melodic Motives and Motivic Design” (618–621), in which he demonstrates the technique with passages from Porter’s “In the Still of the Night,” “I’ve Got You Under My Skin,” “Night and Day,” and “What Is This Thing Called Love.” He also made limited references to it in *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era*; see 72 (on Kern’s “The Way You Look Tonight”) and 142 (on Porter’s “So in Love”). —ED.]

FIGURE 12. “Who Cares?”: verse–refrain motives

(a) refrain

14 22

got a kiss ju - bi - lee,

(b) verse

1

Let it rain and

Detailed description: Figure 12 consists of two musical staves. Staff (a) is labeled '(a) refrain' and shows two measures of music. The first measure starts at measure 14 and contains the notes G4, A4, and B4. The second measure starts at measure 22 and contains the notes G4, A4, and B4. Below the notes are the lyrics 'got a kiss' and 'ju - bi - lee,'. Staff (b) is labeled '(b) verse' and shows four measures of music. The first measure starts at measure 1 and contains the notes G4, A4, B4, and A4. Below the notes are the lyrics 'Let it rain and'.

FIGURE 13. “Who Cares?”: verse–refrain motives

(a) refrain

16

con - quers,

(b) verse

5 11

go un - der! been burned with.

Detailed description: Figure 13 consists of two musical staves. Staff (a) is labeled '(a) refrain' and shows two measures of music. The first measure starts at measure 16 and contains the notes G4, A4, and B4. The second measure contains the notes G4 and A4. Below the notes are the lyrics 'con - quers,'. Staff (b) is labeled '(b) verse' and shows two measures of music. The first measure starts at measure 5 and contains the notes G4, A4, and B4. The second measure starts at measure 11 and contains the notes G4, A4, and B4. Below the notes are the lyrics 'go un - der!' and 'been burned with.'.

oscillation of two forms of the two-note motive that sets “Let it rain and.” In this way, Gershwin refers to the two climactic moments in the refrain at the very outset of the song—assuming of course that the verse is sung before the refrain, as in usual theatrical practice. However interesting this correspondence of notes may be, the semantic connection between the two occurrences of the two-note motive seems as remote as their chronological positions in the song.

Figure 13a, at m. 16 in the refrain, comes from the end of the climactic phrase, setting “conquers” of the wonderful line “Long as you’ve got a kiss that conquers.” Figure 13b shows how the composer brings this very striking descending gesture of the refrain into the verse, where it sets “go under!” and “been burned with.” The semantic contrast here is clear: the

FIGURE 14. “Who Cares?”: verse–refrain motives

(a) refrain

<sup>9</sup> [E F G]

Who cares What banks \_\_\_\_\_

(b) verse

<sup>13</sup> [E F# G]

I love you and you love me And that's how it will

exuberant “conquers” in the refrain reflects a mood that differs radically from “go under” and “been burned with” in the verse; the latter lyrics are clearly related to the Great Depression, which was well under way in 1931 (an election year). And yes, musicians among the readers, I am aware that the two descending sixths are of different sizes, but they are both sixths! It is precisely these sixths that Gershwin incorporates in the left-hand figuration of his *Song-Book* version, as was illustrated in Figure 9b.

Figures 14a and 14b present a more elaborate instance of motivic transfer. The first excerpt shows the stepwise ascending gesture that sets “cares what banks,” while the second shows the expanded version of that motive when transferred to the verse as the beginning of its quasi-bridge. Each main note in the ascending gesture is attached to a beam, while slurs delineate notes that decorate the main notes. The series of ascending main notes are rhythmically unequivocal, as they fall on the downbeats of successive bars, with the lyrics following this pattern exactly: “I love you and” sets the first bar, “you love me and” sets the second. Again, the semantics of the lyrics require attention. In the refrain, the ascending motion introduces the second of the specific illustrations of what the singer does *not* care about: “Who cares what

**FIGURE 15.** “Who Cares?”: verse–refrain motives

(a) refrain

18

should I care? Life is one

(b) verse

17

noth-ing else can ev - er mean a thing.

banks fail in Yonkers?” In the verse, this ascending motion is greatly expanded along with the eternal “I love you” sentiment, creating a contrast that reflects the basic dichotomy of the lyrics.

Figures 15a and 15b again show a pairing of gestures. In the refrain an ascending interrogative motion sets “should I care?” and part of the philosophical response concerning life in general that begins with “Life is one long jubilee.” This motion is transferred to the verse as the last part of the long ascent in the quasi-bridge (which begins in m. 17). Again, there is a semantic correspondence: the embellished form of the motive in Figure 15b sets another “philosophical” rumination, this one on love, to the effect that “nothing else can ever mean a thing.”

Moving from melody to harmony, Figures 16a and 16b illustrate a correspondence of harmonic progressions. Figure 16a shows mm. 15–16, the first of the two climactic moments in the song, with the alliterative lyric “kiss that conquers.” Here Gershwin has introduced the first chromatic notes of the song, the repeated  $E\flat$ s, which also represent the first time a succession of notes of equal duration has occurred. This extraordinary musical event is further intensified by the harmonic support the composer supplies: the  $A\flat$ – $D$ – $G$  succession. When the  $A\flat$  chord comes in, so unexpectedly, setting the loaded word “kiss,” the effect is wonderful—it’s as though the

FIGURE 16. “Who Cares?”: verse–refrain harmonic correspondences

(a) refrain

15  $A\flat 7$   $D+5$   $G7$

kiss that con - quers,

(b) verse

22  $A\flat 7$   $D7\flat 5$   $G$

pub - lic chat-ters?

singer is abruptly transported to another tonal dimension—and that is exactly what has happened and what the Gershwins intended. In the verse, the same  $A\flat$  chord enters first in m. 2, but much more smoothly, setting the word “thunder.” (It recurs in m. 8 as the melodic phrase repeats.) It then appears in m. 22 (as shown in Figure 16b), where the harmonic succession  $A\flat$ – $D$ – $G$  also matches that of the refrain. Although there are no melodic correspondences, as in the previous instances of motivic transfer, the harmonic associations of these distant moments in the song are easily recalled by the attentive and sensitive listener.

I would like to make two final points in connection with this miniature study of motivic transfers between refrain and verse in “Who Cares?”—points that I believe hold for many of the Gershwins’ finest songs. First, the associations are neither accidental nor naive. The motives are non-trivial in the context of the particular song, although they are part of the common vocabulary of tonal music and may have different meanings in other works. Similar effects occur routinely in art songs (although for various reasons I hesitate to make this comparison), so why should it be surprising to find them in the wonderful songs of the Gershwins? My second point is that the occurrence of such motivic transfers sheds a new light on the connection of note and word,

FIGURE 17. “Who Cares?”: refrain, attributes of contour and interval

The musical score for "Who Cares?" is presented in two systems. The first system shows the first six bars of the refrain. The melody is in treble clef, and the bass line is in bass clef. The lyrics are "Who cares the sky to fall". The intervals between notes are labeled as "rising 3rd" (Who to cares), "rising 3rd" (the to sky), and "falling tritone" (to to fall). The chord changes are C7 (bars 1-2), E7 (bars 3-4), and A7 (bars 5-6). The second system shows the next four bars of the refrain. The lyrics are "the sea? Who cares". The intervals between notes are labeled as "rising 3rd" (the to sea?) and "falling 2nd" (Who to cares). The chord change is Fm (bars 7-10). The score includes annotations for intervals and chord changes.

which is the topic of this article. The musical and verbal texts are not simply uni-directional, linear phenomena. Instead they are components of multi-directional designs in which notes refer to both notes and words, and the reverse; they have a symmetrical relation.

Finally, I would like to make a few comments on two surface features of the refrain of “Who Cares” that make it special and that have attracted the attention and engaged the emotions of many listeners over the years: these are melodic dissonance and melodic contour and the lyrics that correspond to them. To illustrate, Figure 17 extracts these features from the first eight-bar phrase of the refrain. The initial melodic gesture, which sets the titular phrase “Who cares,” is a small ascending motion, intensifying the interrogative mode of the lyrics. Moreover, the second note enhances that idea even further, as it is dissonant within the harmony. You need not have taken Harmony 101 to experience the downward pull of the second note from B to A, where the dissonance becomes a consonance. This pattern of dissonance and consonance is repeated, with the same rhythmic pattern, to the very end of the long phrase. The resolution of

the dissonance to a consonant state always occurs on a note of short duration, so that the quality of dissonance is intensified further by rhythm. Figure 17 displays the dissonance-to-consonance note pairs between the staves, for example as “B to A,” where B is the dissonance and A is the consonance to which it resolves. The parenthesized notes show *where* the note of resolution occurs. Thus, B wants to resolve to A, but this resolution occurs only at the end of the next bar. And so on. The second phrase then begins in m. 9 on a consonance, breaking the pattern of dissonance followed by consonance.

With this highly patterned succession of dissonant–consonant pairs, one might expect a correspondingly patterned melody. In fact, the first ascending gesture, “Who cares,” is followed by a similar ascending gesture on “the sky,” which seems to portend yet a third and similar ascent. But the lyric “to fall” breaks the pattern, descending in a text-painting gesture and, in the process, traversing a dissonant interval (the tritone). The interrogative ascending third resumes for the final lyric of the phrase, “the sea?,” and the dissonant note, G, is sustained one more beat, breaking the rhythmic pattern as well. The note to which it resolves, F, is simultaneously the setting of “Who” at the beginning of the next line of the lyrics, resulting in a beautiful linkage.

The succession of four rhythmically similar gestures does not, however, correspond to four syntactically equivalent textual components. As we might have expected, Ira’s words do not succumb to the temptation to imitate the notes in doggerel fashion. Instead, he creates a dialectic with the dissonance–consonance note pairs, consisting of the succession interrogative subject-verb (“Who cares”), noun phrase (“the sky”), infinitive (“to fall”), and interrogative noun phrase (“the sea?”), and in this way prevents the music from falling into a pattern of stereotypical iteration. In the marriage of note and word as we experience it in songs by the Gershwins (and in fine popular songs by other composers and lyricists), a dialectic of this kind is not only salutary, but

often essential. It is one of the many features of these songs that distinguishes them from the ordinary, of which there are many instances in this repertoire.

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## ABSTRACT

The author investigates various ways in which George Gershwin’s music and Ira Gershwin’s lyrics are ingeniously interconnected in two songs: “How Long Has This Been Going On?” (1927) and “Who Cares” (1931). The music’s melodies, motives, harmonies, and forms are tied to the lyrics’ rhymes, alliterations, and semantic meanings. The author demonstrates that the

designs found in the songs are multi-directional: notes refer to other notes and words, and words refer to other words and notes; the relations are symmetrical.

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