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Do It Again: Sequences in Gershwin and Kern's Popular Songs

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DO IT AGAIN: SEQUENCES IN GERSHWIN AND KERN'S POPULAR SONGS

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Americans George Gershwin (1898–1937) and Jerome Kern (1885–1945) both succeeded as Broadway composers but began as "song pluggers" on New York's Tin Pan Alley.[1] Their popular-song output, however, was far from hackwork; indeed, their chromatically inflected, extended tertian harmonies enriched the expressive palette available to song composers at large.[2] Gershwin and Kern seem to have influenced one another: Gershwin idolized the elder composer[3] and stated that his early songs "paid [Kern] the tribute of frank imitation."[4] Conversely, Howard Pollack hears in Kern's song "Whip-Poor-Will," for example, suggestions of Gershwin's "From Now On."[5] In view of the special regard in which Gershwin held Kern, I will compare and contrast their popular songs. For three reasons, I will focus on the composers' uses of sequence: first, I have always associated Kern most closely with "All the Things You Are," a number built almost entirely out of sequences. More pertinently, as Richard Middleton suggests, sequence (as a specific type of small-scale repetition) helps structure Tin

[1] Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 62; Edward Jablonski, *George Gershwin* (New York: Putnam, 1962), 31ff.
[2] Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 366–68. Allan Moore hears the harmonic dialect of interwar Broadway as an infusion of Brahmsian operetta style with jazzy added notes (Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* [Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012], 129).
[3] David Jansen, "George Gershwin," in *Tin Pan Alley: An Encyclopedia of the Golden Age of American Song* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 148.
[4] Pollack, *George Gershwin*, 84.
[5] Ibid., 235.

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Pan Alley songs; through repetition, it establishes a syntax of sonic events.[6] Third, the concrete differences between Kern and Gershwin in terms of sequence help validate critics' more abstract characterizations of the two composers' output. My discussion will begin by showing Gershwin used fewer melodic sequences than Kern and by speculating on musical influence. Next, I will consider ten case studies—songs that illuminate the ways in which Gershwin and Kern used sequence. Finally, I will use my findings to explain other critics' assessments of Gershwin songs.

To make accurate comparisons between the two songwriters, I analyzed 45 refrains by Gershwin and 45 by Kern. I concentrated on refrains because verses are, by and large, mood-setting devices designed to pique the interest of a live audience,[7] whereas a refrain is designed to include the song's most memorable lines or hooks. Moreover, theorist Allen Forte states that Kern seems to have struggled at writing verses,[8] which suggests that analysis of those verses would paint an uncharitable picture of Kern's compositional ability. In choosing songs to examine, I drew on two "greatest hits" anthologies,[9] but I omitted numbers from *Porgy and Bess* because Gershwin intended that work to be more an opera in the tradition of Verdi than a collection of pop ballads.[10] The selections span the whole careers of both composers: the Gershwin anthology runs from "Swanee" (1919) to *The Goldwyn Follies* of 1937, while the Kern collection starts with "How'd You Like to Spoon With Me?" (1905) and ends with "All Through the Day" (1945). I counted the melodic and harmonic sequences in each song and defined "melodic sequence" by the following rules:

[6] Richard Middleton, "'Play It Again Sam': Some Notes on the Productivity of Repetition in Popular Music," *Popular Music* 3 (1983): 236 and 247ff.
[7] Allen Forte, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 37.
[8] Ibid., 74.
[9] George Gershwin, *George Gershwin: The Platinum Collection* (Harlow: Faber Music Ltd, 2006) and Hugh Fordin, *Jerome Kern Collection* (Santa Monica: T.B. Harms Co., 1988).
[10] George Gershwin, "Rhapsody in Catfish Row," in *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 219.

1. A sequence takes a melodic idea (also called a unit or module) and repeats it verbatim (or nearly so), but in a real or tonal transposition.
2. If a melodic idea contains two or more notes and lasts at least one bar, then it may be sequenced.
3. If a melodic idea is shorter than one bar *but* contains at least three notes, and if the melodic idea contains more than one rhythmic value *and/or* the phrase comprising the idea and its repetition(s) contains a change in melodic direction, then the phrase in question may contain a melodic sequence.

I designed Rules 2 and 3 to eliminate from consideration trivial melodic runs and turns. A "harmonic sequence," on the other hand, is simply a transposed repetition (either tonal or real) of a harmonic unit of two or more chords. Surprisingly, few harmonic sequences appear in Gershwin and Kern's songs, despite Tin Pan Alley's penchant for the standard phrase model.[11] Melodic sequences, however, are common.

In the 45 Gershwin "hits," I found 50 melodic sequences (1.1 per song) (Table 1). I found 69 melodic sequences in the Kern refrains (1.5 per song) (Table 2). The frequency of sequences changes over the course of the two composers' careers. Broadly, Gershwin's early songs use close to the same number of sequences as did Kern's early songs. This similarity may bespeak Gershwin's "frank imitation" of Kern. As Gershwin's career progressed, though, he used fewer melodic sequences, whereas Kern's deployment of sequences reached an apex in the middle of his career (Figure 1). One might speculate that these changes were the composers' conscious

[11] Forte, *American Popular Ballad*, 7.

attempts to distinguish themselves from one another, but they more probably represent organic evolutions in style.[12]

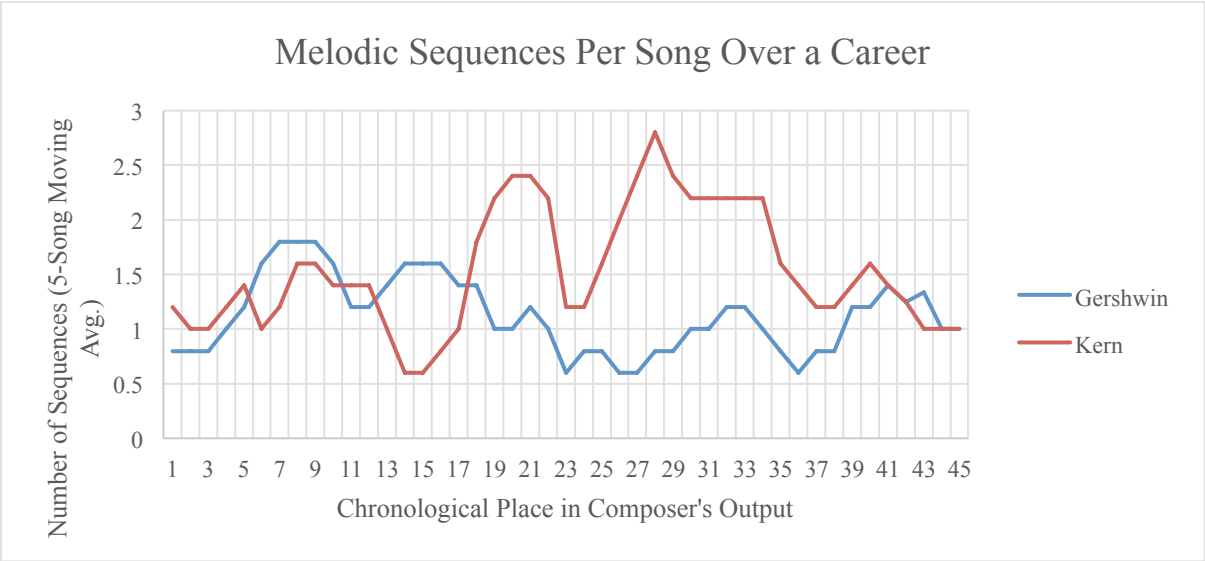


FIGURE 1. A five-song moving average was taken in order to reduce the influence of outliers and mitigate the chronology problem caused by including multiple songs from the same show.

Neither composer drastically modified his use of sequences when writing for film as opposed to Broadway.[13] The Gershwin anthology's nine film songs have nine melodic sequences

[12] It is tempting to attribute Kern's affinity for sequence to his musical studies in Germany and "love affair with London" (Michael Freedland, *Jerome Kern* [London: Robson, 1978], 12–13) but according to Freedland, by the time of the Princess Theatre shows, "nearly all of the old German and English influences had left him" (Ibid., 50). A thorough comparison of the English operetta style with Kern's has yet to be made. See Andrew Lamb, *Jerome Kern in Edwardian London* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Institute for Studies in American Music, Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, 1985) on the influence of London comedies on Kern's predilection for creating intimate musical theater. In contrast, Gerald Bordman discusses the Princess Theatre and Kern's development of "totally American operetta" (Bordman, *Jerome Kern: His Life and Music* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980], 470).

[13] To be sure, Hollywood changed other aspects of Kern's style. According to Wilfrid Sheed, Kern's newfound jazziness purged him of old-fashioned operetta influences: "Fred [Astaire] had to dance all over Jerome Kern's hotel room, including presumably the top of the omnipresent thirties piano, to awaken the cautious Kern at long last from his Viennese slumbers and get him to swing" (Sheed, "The Songwriters in Hollywood," *American Heritage* 44, no. 6 [October 1993]: 82). In contrast, Gershwin, who was at home in jazz, strove to be recognized as a "serious" modern composer (see Carol Oja, "Gershwin and American Modernists of the 1920s," *The Musical Quarterly* 78,

altogether; the rate of one sequence per song does not significantly differ from the global rate of 1.1. Similarly, the 18 Hollywood songs in the Kern collection have 29 sequences. At 1.6 per song, the rate is comparable to the global average of 1.5.[14]

Before moving to musical examples, two statistical caveats: first, the data cannot prove or disprove that the rate of sequences in a musical correlates with the musical's popularity. *Funny Face* and *Show Boat* are the most represented shows in the Gershwin and Kern compilations respectively, which might lead one to think that their songs are among the most popular in the anthologies. However, they could be the most popular shows not because their songs are on average more popular than most other songs in the books, but because both shows contain many songs that are just popular enough to be considered hits. Therefore, we cannot pin down the relative popularities of *individual* songs in the anthologies, which means we cannot determine the effect sequences have on a song's popularity. In sum, this uncertainty on the level of the individual song implies uncertainty as to whether sequences help or hinder a show's ticket sales. To reduce these ambiguities, we could either compare the anthologized "greatest hits" to the many songs that did not make the cut or rank the greatest hits by some objective proxy like recording sales. Both of these pursuits lie outside this paper's scope.[15]

no. 4 [Winter 1994]: 646–668 and Pollack, *George Gershwin*), but it is unclear to what degree continental modernism affected his show-tune composition.

[14] If the composers' theater songs tended to have either very many or few sequences but rarely the average amount, then we could claim the film songs treated sequence differently than the theater songs. However, this is not the case.

[15] Richard Hass et al. define a hit song based on the number of times it has been recorded and conclude with amusing certainty that the Gershwins produced 68 hits between 1918 and 1937 (Hass, Robert Weisberg, and Jimmy Choi, "Quantitative Case-Studies in Musical Composition: The Development of Creativity in Popular-Songwriting Teams," *Psychology of Music* 38, no. 4 [October 2010]: 463–479). Paul Charosh argues that for nineteenth-century popular song, the existence of a song's lyrics in print without music attached is a better indication of the song's popularity than the existence of a printed score (Charosh, "Studying Nineteenth-Century Popular Song," *American Music* 15, no. 4 [Winter 1997]: 480).

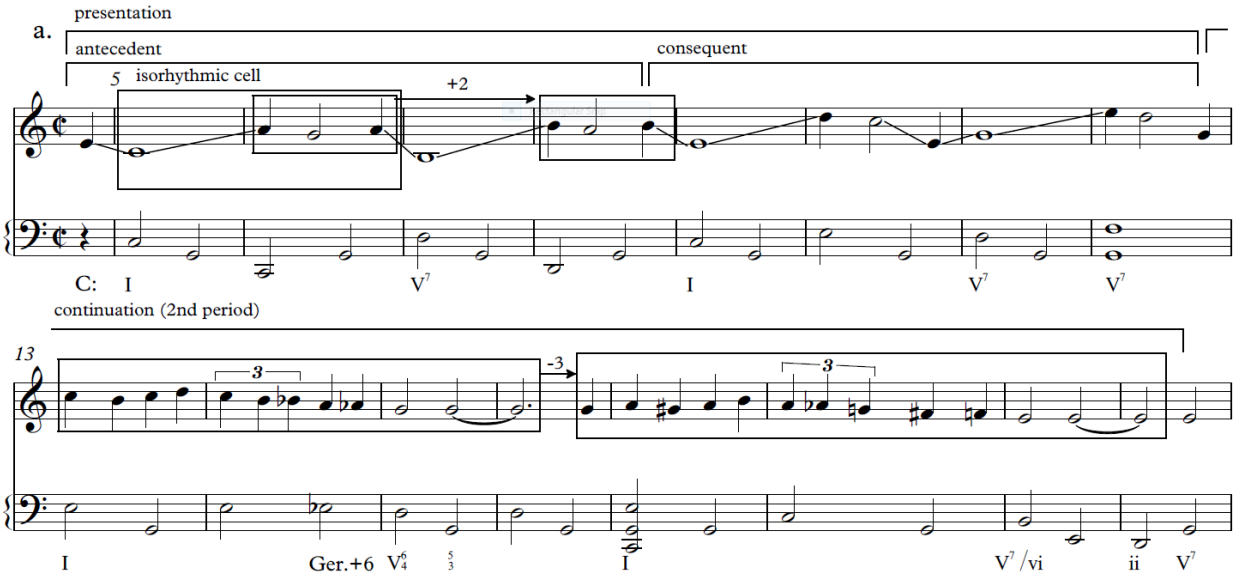
Second, a Welch's t-test[16] of the mean number of sequences per song reveals that the difference between 1.1 for the Gershwin songs and 1.5 for the Kern is not statistically significant ($t = 0.30$). In other words, the variation in sequence frequency between two random songs by the same composer is likely to be greater than the overall variation between Gershwin's corpus and Kern's. Still, in this case, a low t value only implies that a random Kern song *may* not usually have more sequences than a random Gershwin song. The statistic does not disprove my hypothesis that Kern used more sequences than Gershwin. Besides, one reason the t statistic is low is that both composers' predilections for sequences changed over time, creating variety within each composer's output. Another possible reason is the small sample size—with only 88 degrees of freedom, my study allows atypical songs to influence the result. Finally, even assuming the frequency of sequences is comparable for both composers, we will see that the composers' *uses* of sequence differ.

Let us first consider Kern's use of sequence. In the duet "A Fine Romance," he deploys dynamic melodic sequences over comparatively static harmonies (Example 1a). For instance, the refrain's fourth bar (m. 8) shifts the A-G-A motive from the second bar up a major second. Similarly, the melody on "this is!" (m. 12) is one scale degree higher than that on "romance" in m. 10. (Because of irregularities in mm. 7 and 11, these repetitions are only approximately sequential.) Melodic repetition finds support in rhythmic repetition: the refrain's first eight-bar period comprises four iterations of a two-bar rhythmic unit. Despite this isorhythm, the lyric's emotional impact intensifies throughout the period: not only does Kern sequence the melody upward; he also increases the frequency of leaps as the period progresses.[17] The antecedent

[16] Degrees of freedom = 88. Total Gershwin variance = 20.45. Total Kern variance = 57.25. Test result: $p > 0.05$.

[17] The preponderance of leaps in Kern's melodies may reflect an operatic sensibility; William Zinsser hears the leaps in "Make Believe" as producing a "European lilt" (Zinsser, *Easy to Remember: The Great American Songwriters and Their Songs* [Jaffrey, N.H.: David R. Godine, 2000], 19).

melody, including the anacrusis, contains a third, a sixth, a seventh, and an octave. The consequent answers with a fifth, a seventh, a sixth, a third, and a sixth. Kern also maintains interest by varying the size of the leaps away from the whole notes: the first such leap is a sixth, followed by an octave, a seventh, and a sixth. Because it begins and ends with the same interval, that interval sequence helps signal mm. 5–12 as a closed melodic unit, even as the G dominant seventh in mm. 11–12 yearns for resolution.



EXAMPLE 1A. "A Fine Romance," melody and bass line.

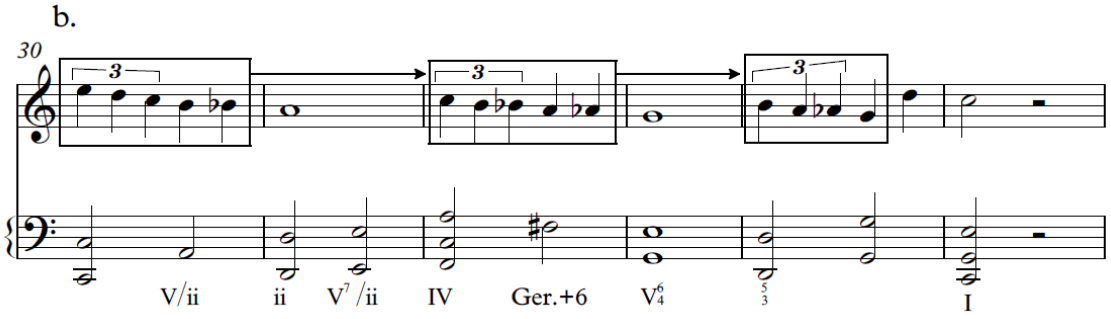
That dominant harmony seems less momentous, however, when we consider that it has already occurred in mm. 7–8. Indeed, while the first period's melody leaps and develops, the supporting harmony oscillates between tonic and dominant at a rate of one harmony every two bars. By contrast, the harmonies in the second period (mm. 13–20) are less regular. For example, the period starts with nearly two bars of the tonic triad, but on the fourth beat of m. 14 Kern harmonizes a chromatic bass with an inverted "German" augmented-sixth chord. This chord

resolves conventionally—despite its unusual inversion—to a cadential dominant chord in m. 15. The second phrase of the period begins, like the first, with two bars of tonic. In m. 19, Kern introduces a new sonority: an E major-minor seventh, or V^7 of vi. The chord is unremarkable by itself—one would expect it to initiate a standard circle-of-fifths progression—yet it resolves not to vi but to ii, thus skipping over one step in the circle. We cannot write off the E^7 as a passing chord, since its bass note E is approached by skip from the C-major chord in m. 18. Rather, Kern seems to have telescoped two functions (III^7 and pre-pre-dominant) into one chord. And the absence of a resolving A minor chord may have larger formal significance: because mm. 5–12 emphasize dominant-tonic motion so strongly, perhaps Kern thought resolving this applied dominant to its tonic would belabor the point. In any case, after the ii chord on the downbeat of m. 20, Kern quickly shifts to V to prepare for the start of the next section. This quickening of harmonic rhythm at the end of the phrase recalls the end of mm. 13–16. On a larger scale, if we consider mm. 5–20 a long sentence, then each half of the continuation (mm. 13–20) is a microcosm of the entire sentence, at least in terms of harmonic interest. In other words, just as the sentence as a whole moves from stable two-bar harmonic units to shorter, less stable ones, so do the constituent phrases of its second half. These shifts in harmonic rhythm pull against the rhythmic regularity of the A section's melodic sequences.

So, the second period has more varied harmonies than the first. The two passages likewise contrast melodically, for whereas mm. 5–12 are diatonic and full of leaps, mm. 13–20 are chromatic and smooth. Also, the first period ascends while the second descends (expressing a glumness well-matched by "yesterday's mashed potatoes"). But the two periods nonetheless share a salient feature: they combine melodic sequence with non-sequential harmony. As in the

first period, the second period's two phrases both move from tonic to dominant but have sequential melodies.

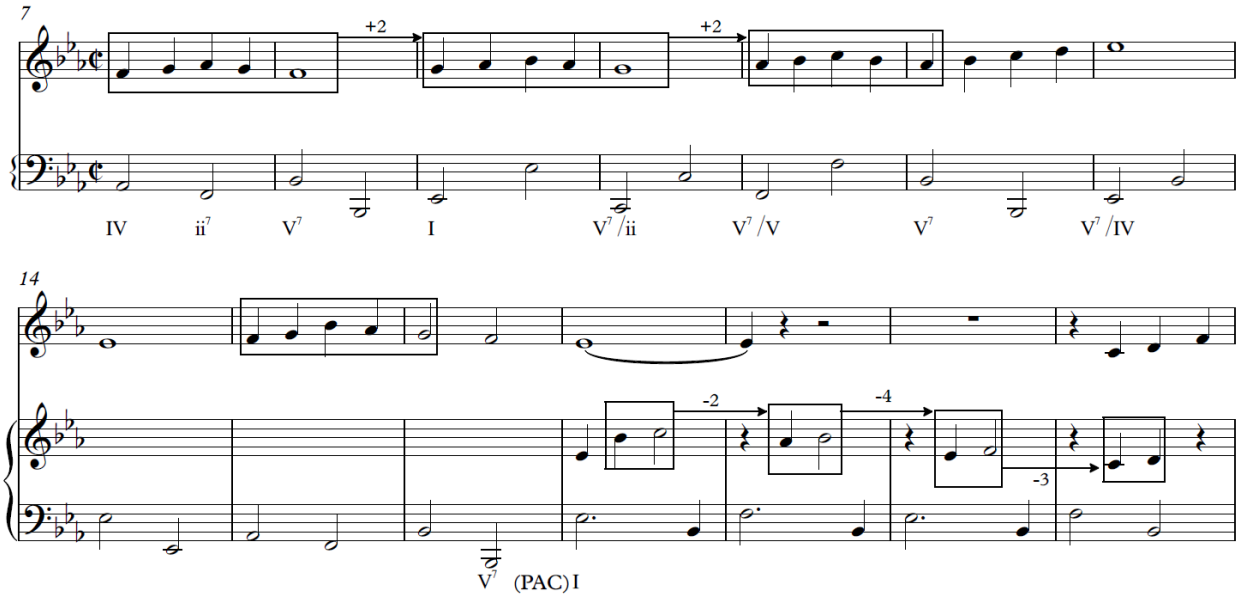
The next fifteen bars form another large sentence that contains an eight-bar period and a seven-bar period. Musically, this sentence is identical to the first until m. 30, where Kern uses a bass A instead of an E♭ and replaces the augmented sixth chord with an $A^{7\flat9}$ (Ex. 1b). This switch from an augmented sixth to an applied V of ii strengthens the arrival on D minor in m. 31. And since the applied V is in root position (unlike the augmented sixth in m. 14), m. 30 seems to herald a more settled, more final cadence than did the augmented sixth. Indeed, the harmony moves (by way of another unresolved major-minor seventh) from D minor in m. 31 to F major (IV) on the downbeat of m. 32, then to a cadential 6–4 by way of another inverted augmented sixth (mm. 32–34), and finally lands on a perfect authentic cadence in C on m. 35. This ending differs from that of the first sentence not only in harmony but also in melody: mm. 32 and 34 constitute a melodic sequence of the motive in mm. 14 and 30—a sequence that "fragments" the first half of the continuation phrase. Once again, this melodic sequence is not supported by harmonic sequence.



EXAMPLE 1B. "A Fine Romance," simplified accompaniment.

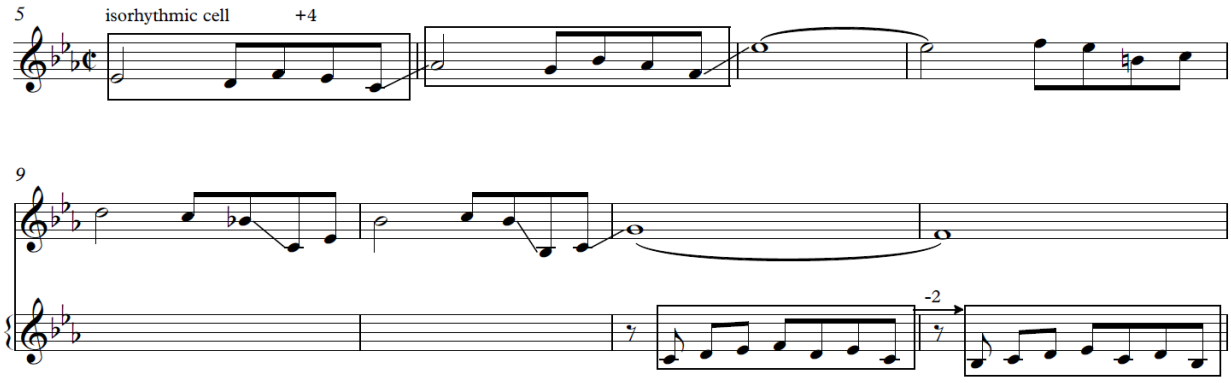
Like "A Fine Romance," "The Way You Look Tonight" was written for the 1936 dance comedy *Swing Time*[18] and showcases Kern's expressive sequences (Ex. 2). The melody of mm. 7–8 is sequenced upward in mm. 9–10 and again in mm. 11–12. But the sequential motion does not extend to harmony: the chords that underlie the melodic sequence are IV, ii^7 / V^7 / I / VI^7 / II^7 / V^7 (with slashes representing barlines). The sequence leads to a high E deceptively harmonized with V^7 of IV (m. 13), thus allowing Kern to restate (approximately) the sequenced motive once more in mm. 15–16. This final restatement, as a cadential figure, redeems the failure of the high E to resolve to tonic. It also shows how the basic unit of the melodic sequence expressed in the first eight bars finds further expression in a perfect authentic cadence. After the cadence comes a piano codetta that is itself a melodic sequence; the B♭–C whole step in m. 17 is shifted down three times over the next three measures. Allen Forte observes that this sequence of dyads reverses the upward trajectory of mm. 5–12.[19] In the final chorus, the cadential sequence returns in modified form, this time hummed by the singer. As Forte notes, "these final two-note motivic gestures…imply resolutions, successively, to primary tone B♭1, to apex pitch E♭2, and nadir pitch +2 E♭1"[20]—three important pitches in delineating a song's overall shape and somewhat akin to a church mode's reciting tone and final. In this way, Kern helps articulate the song's form by means of a short, unassuming sequence.[21]

[18] Fordin, *Jerome Kern Collection*, 157.
[19] Forte, *American Popular Ballad*, 70.
[20] Ibid., 73.
[21] To Allen Forte, the song's gripping melodic contour makes up for a certain blandness in rhythm (Forte, *Listening to Classic American Popular Songs* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001], 113.) Contrast this with Edward Jablonski's avowal that "dancers liked what George [Gershwin] could do with rhythm" from a young age (Jablonski, *George Gershwin*, 32).



EXAMPLE 2. "The Way You Look Tonight," melody and bass line.

Kern's "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" (Ex. 3) begins with another short melodic sequence: he transposes the five-note figure in m. 5 up a fourth in m. 6. The rhythmic pattern of a half note followed by four eighth notes persists in the next phrase, which descends from the long E♭ on "true" (m. 7). This consequent phrase is not exactly sequential, but the melodic contours in mm. 8, 9, and 10 are similar. Despite the first period's homogeneity of rhythm and contour, Kern creates interest by varying the size of leaps. For instance, the leap on "I knew" (m. 1 to m. 2) is a sixth, but the one on "was true" (m. 6 to m. 7) is a seventh. And in the next phrase, "something here" includes a descending seventh and "cannot be" includes a descending octave. The period ends with an ascending fifth on "denied." So, like the refrain of "A Fine Romance," the first section of "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" contains a succession of leaps that first grow and then diminish. This intervallic symmetry, though imperfect, lends cohesion to the refrain's first eight bars.

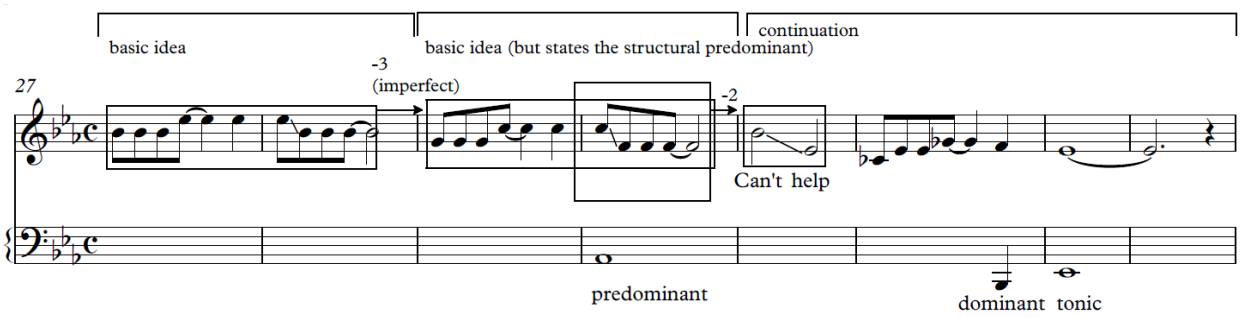


EXAMPLE 3. "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," melody.

Two numbers from *Show Boat* (1927) likewise start with melodic sequences in the voice, but these sequences descend. For example, in "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," the first two bars of the refrain are sequenced down a third in the third and fourth bars (Ex. 4). The sequence is not perfect, as the second iteration ends with a descending fifth where the first statement dropped by a fourth. Yet this imperfection allows Kern to elide two sequences, for the lyrics "can't help" in the next measure are also set to a descending fifth. That is, the second half of the first sequence becomes the first half of the second sequence. The second sequence has one-bar units as opposed to the first sequence's two-bar units; this difference increases the musical momentum as the phrase progresses. This technique resembles the standard practice of fragmenting a basic idea into smaller chunks over the course of a musical sentence.[22] In the same way, Kern uses sequences to push his phrase to the cadence, even as the harmonic rhythm remains constant from mm. 27–31.[23]

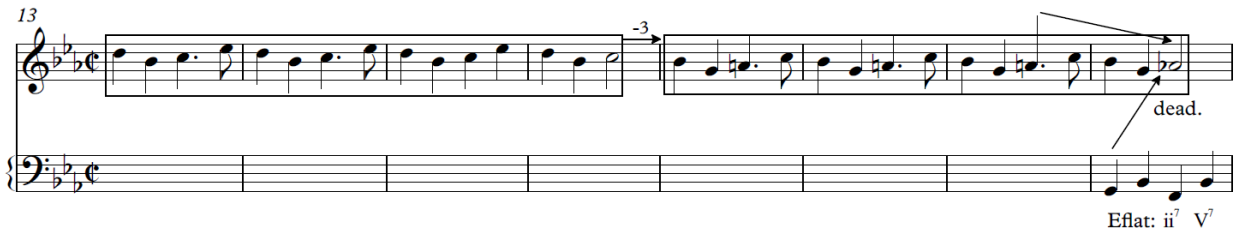
[22] Indeed, Michael Callahan analyzes this phrase as a musical sentence whose second basic idea (on the words "love one man 'til I die") has the phrase-structural function of a continuation in order to compensate for the fact that the lyric is only three lines long instead of the usual four (Callahan, "Sentential Lyric-Types in the Great American Songbook," *Music Theory Online* 19, no. 3 [September 2013]: 31).

[23] While the elision of two sequences may not disprove Bordman's claim that the song is "structurally unexceptional" (Bordman, *Jerome Kern*, 290), it does give the melody momentum.



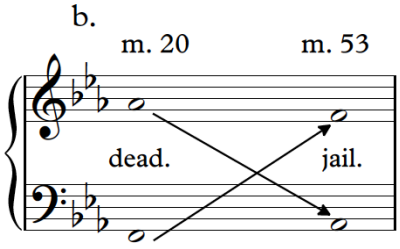
EXAMPLE 4. "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," melody and bass-functional analysis. Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II.

In "Ol' Man River," the other *Show Boat* song, sequences appear in the verse but not at the start of the refrain. The unusually long verse is in ABA form, and its B section (mm. 13–20, Ex. 5a) comprises a descending melodic sequence with two four-bar modules. The melody fits the lyrics, which lament the black laborers' oppression: the use of sequence, whether ascending or descending, suggests the acts of walking and working, and the sequence's descent evokes the workers' dejection. Despite the melody's clear directionality, its supporting harmonies are static: over a G pedal point, Kern oscillates between G minor and C minor harmonies (similar to the opening of "A Fine Romance," discussed above). This stasis allows the bridge's final two chords—an F minor seventh and a B♭ dominant seventh—to surprise the ear. These chords not only serve as predominant and dominant in the home key of E♭, they also set the lyric appropriately. Specifically, the melodic A♭ in m. 20 that enables the Fm^7 and $B♭^7$ is just as shocking as the word it sets—"dead"—because it displaces the bass G and soprano A♭ that have persisted throughout the bridge.



EXAMPLE 5A. "Ol' Man River," melody. Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II.

Another curious aspect of "Ol' Man River" besides the verse's length is that the verse's bridge is nearly identical to that of the refrain. The return of the tragic melodic sequence in m. 46 again fits the lyric, which shift its gaze from the rolling river to the plight of the river laborers. As in the verse, the refrain's bridge lies on a nearly constant G pedal until the retransition to the A section. But in this case, the melody ends on an F instead of an A♭. Conversely, the bass moves from A♭ to B♭ rather than from F to B♭. Thus, the melody and accompaniment perform a long-term voice exchange between the verse's bridge and the refrain's bridge (Ex. 5b). This subtle shift—which does not change harmonic function—makes explicit the displacement of the low G by the A♭. Despite composer Alec Wilder's claim that "Ol' Man River" "is not a complex song, melodically or harmonically,"[24] the tune showcases Kern's ability to create interest out of melodic sequence and simple yet slightly varied repetition.



EXAMPLE 5B. Long-term voice exchange in "Ol' Man River."

[24] Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 56.

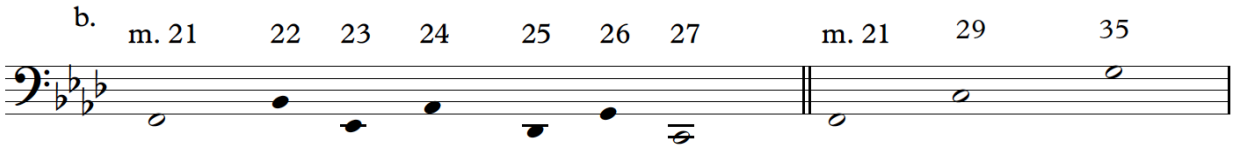
"All the Things You Are" (1939) likewise reveals Kern's ability to maintain the listener's interest during extended sequential passages (Ex. 6a). The refrain begins with a circle-of-fifths (descending-second) sequence with two-bar modules. Unlike other sequences we have seen, this one is harmonic as well as melodic. The first repetition of the module is exact, at least in the vocal line, but the third module features a leap of a tritone (m. 26) instead of a perfect fourth. This poignant interval—which does not resolve correctly according to the common practice—not only highlights the word "winter;" it also adds intrigue in the midst of an otherwise repetitive (but very beautiful) period. Indeed, as Wilder observes with characteristic imprecision, "That B♮ in the sixth measure is a marvelous twist, but not easy."[25] Zooming out from the first period, we see that a larger-scale sequence governs the first two A sections as a unit: the period from mm. 29 to 36 is an approximate copy of the first period transposed down a fourth. The refrain's first half thus resembles a fractal: the sequence with two-bar units nests inside a sequence with eight-bar units. The two sequences, however, are not scaled copies of one another; instead, the small-scale sequence is ruled by descending fifths while the larger one traces two *ascending* fifths (in pitch-class space) from the F-minor seventh chord in m. 21 to C minor in m. 29 to G major in m. 35 (Ex. 6b). Kern uses this inversion to create variety within his sequence-laden stanza. Another way he creates variety (or rather the same way differently stated) is by breaking the circle-of-fifths motion at m. 29 in favor of a harmonic reinterpretation of the previous measure's bass note. After cadencing on a bright C major seventh in. m. 28, Kern lowers the chordal third and seventh in m. 29 to thrust the music flat-ward and prepare the eventual cadence on G major. Again, this unexpected chromatic shift not only paints the text—"breathless hush of evening" being well suited to a dusky minor seventh chord—but also provides musical interest. In short, the first chorus exhibits Kern's skillful integration of variety and repetition.

[25] Ibid., 78.

a.

EXAMPLE 6A. "All the Things You Are," reduced accompaniment. Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II.

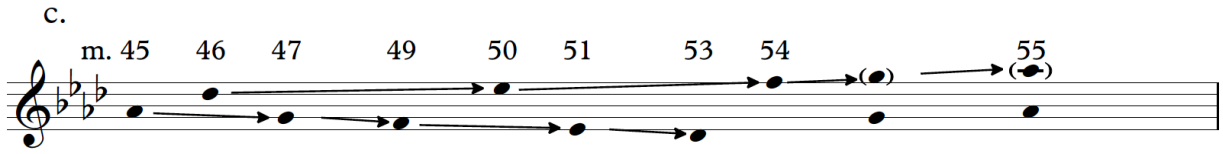
b.



EXAMPLE 6B. Short- and long-term interval cycles in "All the Things You Are."

The bridge likewise includes a sequence, but it is only melodic this time. Kern repeats the melody from mm. 37–39 down a minor third in mm. 41–43. The repetition is inexact; Forte

considers the non-sequential B♭ in m. 42 a particularly poignant deviation.[26] Between the bridge and the reprise, Kern again executes a dramatic chromatic reinterpretation: the G♯ in m. 43 first becomes the root of an A♭ augmented triad in m. 44 and finally becomes the third of the F minor triad in m. 45. The transition from m. 43 to m. 44 inverts the earlier transition from C major to C minor (mm. 28–29). That is, whereas the earlier shift preserved the bass and lowered the melody line a half step, this shift preserves the melody note and raises an accompanimental voice a half step. (This long-term "voice exchange" recalls the F–A♭ trade-off in "Ol' Man River.") The reprise of the A section finally breaks the sequential mold—in mm. 49–50, the voice leaps up a minor seventh rather than a fourth. The next downbeat leaps down a seventh to E♭, which yields a compound melody in contrary motion with itself (Ex. 6c): the lower "voice" moves from A♭ (m. 45) to G (m. 47) to F (m. 49) to E♭ (m. 51) to D♭ (m. 53), while the upper voice moves from D♭ (m. 46) to E♭ (m. 50) to the apex F on the word "are" (m. 54). Thus, "All the Things You Are" treats sequence as a status quo that must be transcended; when Kern liberates the reprise from its sequential confines, the effect is ecstatic.

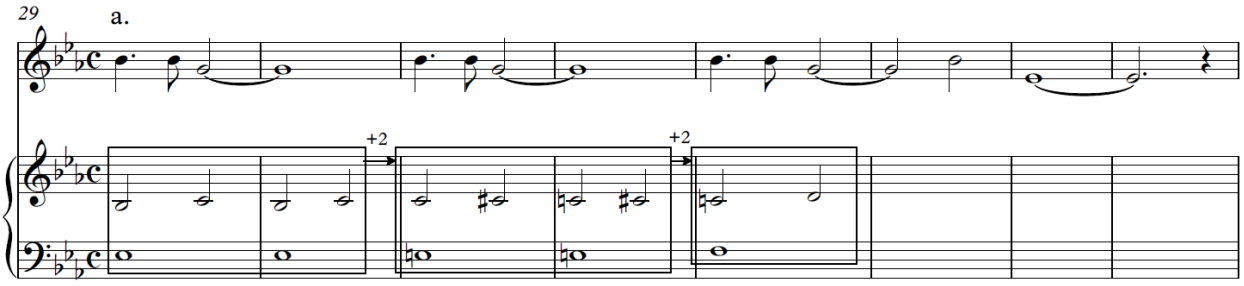


EXAMPLE 6C. Compound melody in "All the Things You Are."

In contrast, Gershwin's use of sequence is often one dramatic step behind Kern's.[27] That is, Gershwin holds literal repetition to be the status quo and transcends it via sequential repetition. For example, the refrain of "'S Wonderful" does not indulge in melodic sequence until the B section. Melodically, the first two periods are extremely repetitive—the motive in

[26] Forte, *American Popular Ballad*, 77.
[27] Here, "behind" is not pejorative.

mm. 29–30 appears six times[28] and the melody in the first period never strays from an E♭ major triad. In counterpoint to this melodic monotony, however, the piano part has an ascending sequence (Ex. 7a). Specifically, from m. 29 to m. 33, the "tenor" voice in the accompaniment moves from a B♭–C dyad to C–C♯ and finally to C–D. At the same time, the left hand traces a rising line from E to E♭ to F. This harmonic sequence is inexact because the other voices do not change the same way, but it is still a harmonic sequence because it involves two accompanimental voices. Thus, Gershwin creates a delicious tension between static melody and surging harmony in the first six bars of the refrain. Gershwin repeats the process in the next period, whose melody ends on C—the highest melodic note so far and the first not to belong to the tonic triad.

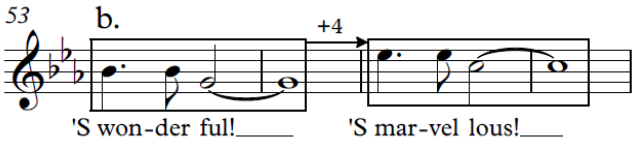


EXAMPLE 7A. "'S Wonderful," reduced accompaniment.

In the bridge, Gershwin hints at, but does not unambiguously state, a descending melodic sequence: the motive on "glamorous" (mm. 47–48), the rhythm of which matches that of the titular motive, is repeated a step lower on "amorous" (mm. 51–52) But the two bars (mm. 49–50) between those two iterations obscure the sequence because they merely repeat the D♮'s found in mm. 45–46 instead of sequencing them down a step. In the final A section, however, a true melodic sequence takes hold; the "'s wonderful!" motive in mm. 53–54 rises a perfect fourth in mm. 55–56 (Ex. 7b). At the same time, the harmonic sequence suggested in the first two A

[28] These reiterations exemplify the "musematic repetition" that Richard Middleton finds in many Tin Pan Alley songs (Middleton, "'Play It Again Sam'": 248).

sections is absent in the last. This replacement of a harmonic sequence with a melodic one suggests a musico-dramatic teleology: the bridge "influences" the reprise, not only via the high E♭ that occurs in mm. 44 and 55, but also by opening the A section to the possibility of melodic sequence. In this way, the reprise breaks free from the first period's constrained melody. Whether Gershwin was conscious of this dynamic is unknown,[29] but the melodic change nonetheless effectively depicts the speaker's increasing rapture and lends a unifying, goal-directed force to the entire refrain.

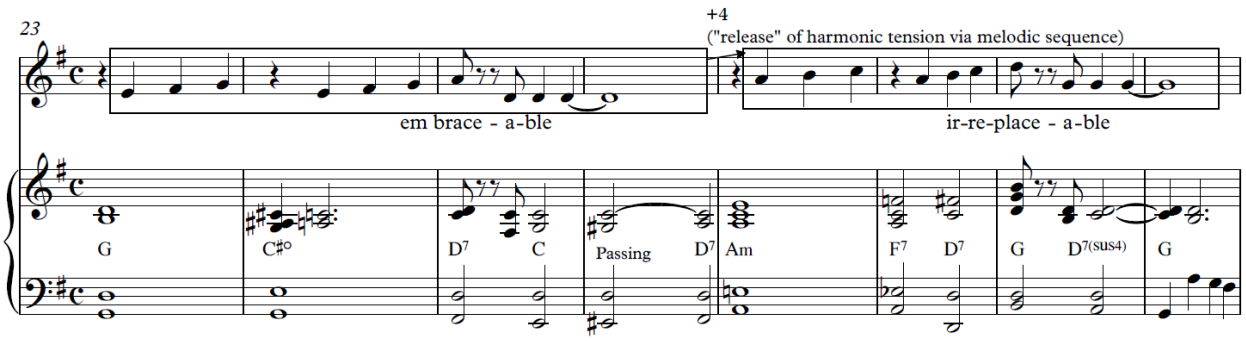


EXAMPLE 7B. "'S Wonderful," lyrics by Ira Gershwin.

The Gershwins' "Embraceable You" (Ex. 8) from *Girl Crazy* (1930) juxtaposes melodic sequence with the shifting harmonic motion also found in "'S Wonderful." First, consider the song's melodic sequences. The second four-bar phrase (mm. 27–30) of the refrain shifts the melody of the first phrase up a fourth, perhaps conveying the rhetorical intensity suggested by substituting "irreplaceable" for "embraceable."[30] The refrain's melodic sequence is almost a harmonic one, despite the seeming difference in function between the C♯ diminished seventh (m. 24) and the F dominant seventh (m. 28). In fact, one could add a bass A♭ to the former chord to turn it into a dominant ♭9 with no change in function. One could also perform a tritone

[29] Gershwin's intention is in any case irrelevant to the present discussion. His speed of song composition was legendary (e.g. John Jones, *Reinventing Dixie: Tin Pan Alley's Songs and the Creation of the Mythic South* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015], 159) and would not have left him much time for conscious music-theoretical reflection.
[30] Forte, *Listening*, 76.

substitution on the F^7 to turn it into a $B^{7\flat9}$. With these changes in place, the relation between the two chords in mm. 23 and 24 (G and A^7) is identical to the relation between the downbeat chords in mm. 27 and 28 (A and B^7). By avoiding this harmonic repetition, however, Gershwin allows the F^7 to act as a chromatic passing chord to the dominant D^7 in the second half of the bar.[31]



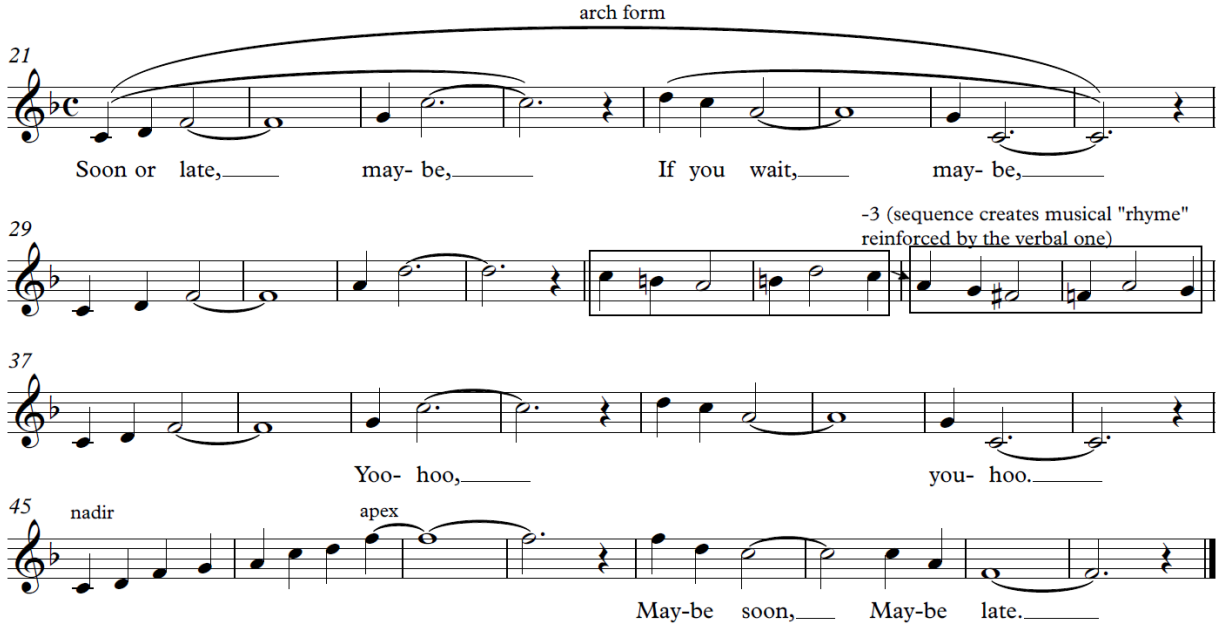
EXAMPLE 8. "Embraceable You," simplified accompaniment. Lyrics by Ira Gershwin.

Besides featuring a melodic sequence, the refrain of "Embraceable You" also combines melodic stasis with shifting harmony. The first period's basic idea—the ascending trichord in m. 23—is repeated exactly in m. 24, but the harmony changes from G major to a C♯ diminished seventh. A similar shift happens in mm. 27–28. As in "'S Wonderful," harmonic motion beneath melodic sameness creates a tension that is later released in melodic sequence. The scale on which this happens in "Embraceable You" is smaller, to be sure, but the two songs nevertheless exhibit the same "teleological" use of melodic sequence.

Gershwin's use of sequence not only reveals neat musical structures; it also showcases his brother's skill at fitting words to music. In the ballad "Maybe" (Ex. 9), Gershwin again reserves melodic sequence for after the refrain's opening. The refrain includes two double

[31] Forte, *American Popular Ballad*, 164. Incidentally, this procedure reverses that of the verse, in which mm. 5–6 copy the melody of mm. 3–4 down a fourth.

parallel periods, the first going from m. 21 to m. 36 and the second from m. 37 to the song's end. This parallelism, both between the two double periods and between the antecedent and consequent in each, complements the ambivalence of the lyrics: whether love will be found remains in the balance. In fact, the parallelism also extends to a third musical level—the first phrase, "Soon or late, maybe," ascends, while the second phrase, "If you wait, maybe," returns to the low C and thereby negates the first phrase's optimism. Although the two phrases have the same rhythm, they do not constitute a melodic sequence because they have opposite contours. A sequence does appear, however, in the consequent to the first double period. The melody in mm. 33–34 is approximately repeated in mm. 35–36. Like the sequence in the bridge of "'S Wonderful," this one is inexact, but it still provides a sense of musical direction absent from the refrain's first eight bars. Accordingly, mm. 33–36 are the first four bars in which the word "maybe" does not appear. Here, Ira uses his brother's melodic change to effect a change in tone from unsure to hopeful.



EXAMPLE 9. "Maybe," melody. Lyrics by Ira Gershwin.

After the close of the double parallel period, one would expect a bridge section. In the bridge, the music might abandon the stasis of the first two A sections and prepare the listener for a transformation in the final chorus, perhaps a change like that in the last A section of "'S Wonderful." But in "Maybe," George abjures a bridge and simply reprises the exposition in the manner of a Rossini overture. (And like Rossini, he adjusts the final section in order to cadence on tonic.) In other words, the oscillating yet static contrary motion returns, with "maybe" replaced by "yoo-hoo." The last four bars of the vocal line are almost a descending sequence, yet their effect is not to propel but to balance both the near-sequence in mm. 33–36 and the ascending line in mm. 45–47. Throughout the refrain, Ira expresses this sense of balance in at least three ways. First, he ends successive lines with the same word ("maybe" or "yoo-hoo"). Second, he creates a verbal parallel between mm. 49 and 50. Finally, he sets the ascending line in mm. 45–47 to the ecstatic "Paradise will open its gate" and sets the answering phrase to the more subdued "Maybe soon, Maybe late." The song ends ambivalently, or perhaps on a slightly dejected note that recalls the verse's opening lament of "today is a blue day." Thus, in "Maybe," Ira exploits George's use of sequential and static melody for lyrical effect.

The refrain of "I Got Rhythm" from *Girl Crazy* opens with a four-bar melodic arch similar to the first eight bars of the refrain of "Maybe" (Ex. 10a). The pitches on "I got music" (mm. 31–32) are the exact reverse of those on the title phrase (mm. 29–30). They form set class (0257), a pentatonic subset from which Gershwin's teacher Joseph Schillinger would later derive several symmetrical scales.[32] In m. 33, a second arch begins, but the last two bars of the period break the pattern ("Who could ask for anything more?"). Beneath this melodically conservative period, the harmonies move three times through the standard phrase model: tonic—

[32] Steven Gilbert, "Gershwin's Art of Counterpoint," *The Musical Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (Autumn 1984): 433–434.

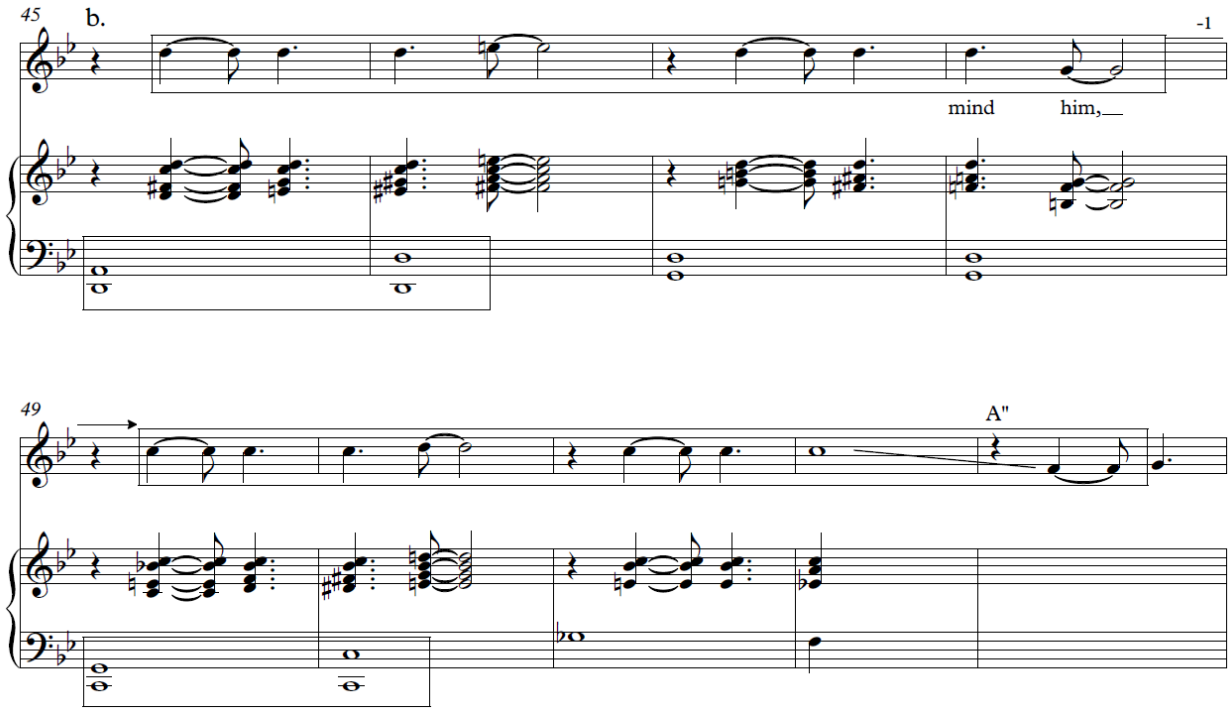
predominant—dominant. The period's most colorful harmonies occur as embellishing chords on the second half of the third beats of mm. 29, 31, 33, and 35 (the last of which is a modally-mixed E♭ minor triad that harmonizes E♭, the highest melodic pitch yet). Finally, the refrain's second period repeats verbatim the first. In short, the syncopated rhythm is by far the most creative aspect of the refrain's first half.[33] No surprise, then, that Ira Gershwin chose the lyric he did.

EXAMPLE 10A. "I Got Rhythm," simplified accompaniment. Lyrics by Ira Gershwin.

In the bridge (Ex. 10b), George exhibits his now-familiar technique of using sequence to release tension accumulated in the chorus. The bridge opens with an abrupt tonicization of G major beneath the song's new apex, E♭ (mm. 45–47). This harmonic and registral shift is by itself enough to disrupt the previous section's monotony, but Gershwin adds further interest by

[33] Ethel Merman affectionately called this song's melody a "big tooty thing" (Ean Wood, *George Gershwin: His Life and Music* [London: Sanctuary Publishing, 1996], 162).

sequencing the melody in mm. 45–48 down a whole step in mm. 49–52. The sequence is almost harmonic as well as melodic, but the G♭ in the bass in m. 51 defers the F chord to m. 52. If mm. 49–52 imitated the progression in mm. 45–48 exactly, the F chord would first appear in m. 51. In fact, the sequence's melody is shifted "to the right" just like its harmony: whereas m. 48 contains a descending fifth on "mind him," m. 52 rests on a whole-note C. For the sequence's second module, the descending fifth is delayed such that it coincides with the start of the reprise on F (m. 53). In this way, Gershwin uses sequence to elide the bridge with the third A section—an elision that contrasts with and redeems the sharp boundary between the second A section and the bridge.



EXAMPLE 10B. "I Got Rhythm," simplified accompaniment.

In short, whereas Kern tends to open his refrains with sequences, Gershwin tends to save sequences for bridge sections.[34] Also, Gershwin sometimes uses sequence to link the bridge to the reprise of the A section, either directly (as in "I Got Rhythm") or indirectly (as in "'S Wonderful"). The variety with which Gershwin and Kern deploy sequence belies Isaac Goldberg's 1930 critique of Tin Pan Alley music as a "product of robots, by robots and for robots."[35] Rather, their melodic and harmonic constructions reinforce lyrics and give songs individual dramatic arcs.

The foregoing comparison of Gershwin and Kern in the realm of musical sequence helps explain some critics' receptions of the two artists. While Kern's tunes have been characterized as European in their soaring quality,[36] Gershwin's are seen as more abrasive. For example, the qualitative differences between Gershwin and Kern enumerated in Alec Wilder's *American Popular Song* paint Gershwin in a relatively poor light. In his introduction, Wilder says Gershwin's tunes were "the hard sell, as opposed to the softer, gentler persuasiveness of, say, Kern."[37] He goes on to express preference for Gershwin's more introverted, Kern-like melodies and ends the chapter by apologizing for his mixed reception of Gershwin: "however excitingly native [Gershwin's] writing may have been, I feel that there was a scrim—a vaguely transparent theater curtain—between him and what he sought musically."[38] In the context of Wilder's

[34] See Callahan, "Sentential Lyric-Types," 31, who counts sentential phrases in Gershwin and Kern songs and finds that Gershwin uses sentences more often than Kern. The *short-short-long* pattern of the musical sentence, in which the continuation often acts as a "release" of the presentation's material, may be analogous to Gershwin's use of sequence to release tension created by exact repetition.

[35] Quoted in Keir Keightly, "Taking Popular Music (and Tin Pan Alley and Jazz) Seriously" in *Journal of Popular Music Studies* vol. 22, no. 1 (January 2010): 94.

[36] Zinsser, *Easy to Remember*, 17. In a model syllabus for teaching Tin Pan Alley songs to singers, Paul Christman puts Kern (with his "lyric melodies") one unit after Gershwin (with his "infectious rhythms"), perhaps because Kern's songs are more difficult for the singer (Christman, "Tin Pan Alley Repertoire: A Practical Guide for Study," *Journal of Singing* 63, no. 2 [November 2006]: 201–203).

[37] Wilder, *American Popular Song*, 122. Cf. Ulf Lindberg, "Popular Modernism? The 'Urban' Style of Interwar Tin Pan Alley," *Popular Music* 22, no. 3 (January 2003): 283–298, who reads Tin Pan Alley lyrics as expressing a "cool," urban attitude toward romance.

[38] Wilder, *American Popular Song*, 161.

analyses of individual songs, this cryptic remark suggests he finds Gershwin's work too deliberately complex, especially in its harmonies. And as far as melody goes, Wilder lambasts both "Maybe" and "'S Wonderful" for dullness and comments more than once on Gershwin's penchant for repeated notes.[39] My analysis shows that the criticisms Wilder levels may be understood in terms of Gershwin and Kern's differing treatments of sequence: while Kern more readily indulges in melodic sequence over static harmony, Gershwin prefers to repeat melodic motives exactly.[40] But as we have seen, Gershwin often uses sequence effectively, if not as frequently as Kern. For example, although Wilder compliments Gershwin's harmonic sequence at the end of "Things Are Looking Up,"[41] he fails to appreciate Gershwin's dramatic use of *melodic* sequence in bridges to release tension caused by earlier melodic repetition.[42] Instead, Wilder gravitates toward the instant gratification derived from Kern's "pure, uncontrived melodic line."[43] Musicologist Bruce Bawer echoes this sentiment, claiming that while "Gershwin was a genius," some of his songs have a "hard edge and whiff of artifice" absent from Kern's.[44] While the criticism is surely directed in part at Gershwin's driving, syncopated rhythms, it could just as easily refer to his penchants for literal repetition of motives and intricate harmonic motion. Kern, on the other hand, is happy simply to alternate tonic with dominant beneath a

[39] Ibid., 139, 140, and 149. See also Zinsser, *Easy to Remember*, 26.
[40] Wilder's characterizations of style in Gershwin and Kern are almost certainly complex responses to both top-voice melodies and the surging, "harmonic" inner-voice lines of which Gershwin was fond. Allan Moore posits that in popular music the "harmonic filler layer" greatly contributes to the listener's perception of musical style (Moore, *Song Means*, 21).
[41] Wilder, *American Popular Song*, 160.
[42] See Nicholas Tawa on the bridge of "'S Wonderful," in which the C in m. 40 and the D on "made" release the tension built up by the A section's confinement to the pitch classes B♭, G, and E♭ (Tawa, *Supremely American: Popular Song in the 20th Century: Styles and Singers and What They Said About America* [Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2005], 51). As discussed above, the bridge in this song is not exactly sequential but nonetheless powerfully wrenches the melody out of a zone of stasis.
[43] Wilder, *American Popular Song*, 29. See also Edward Pessen, "The Great Songwriters of Tin Pan Alley's Golden Age: A Social, Occupational, and Aesthetic Inquiry," *American Music* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 90.
[44] Bruce Bawer, "Solid Gold," *The Hudson Review* 58, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 438–439. In a more positive light, Nicholas Tawa, writing on influences of jazz in Gershwin's songs, praises "strong and firm offerings" like "Fascinating Rhythm" (Tawa, *Supremely American*, 12). In contrast, see his characterization of Kern's ballads as "sedate" (Ibid., 93).

soaring melody, as in "A Fine Romance."[45] Again, though, this comparison does not negate Gershwin's melodic skill; in fact, his ability to save sequences until climaxes lends his songs dramatic force.

I have shown that Kern used more melodic sequences than Gershwin. Close reading of individual songs has revealed that Gershwin's uses of sequence to heighten drama differ from Kern's. Finally, I have placed my conclusions in the context of one stream of Gershwin reception. Further research should encompass all songs by the two composers, not just their most famous. This line of inquiry would show whether the number of sequences in a song correlates with the song's popularity. One should also examine how Gershwin and Kern's sequences differ—if at all—from those in songs by other Tin Pan Alley composers like Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, and Irving Berlin. Such investigation would bring us closer to delineating the great influence Kern supposedly had on Gershwin.

GERSHWIN – date – abbreviated show title	**Only M seq**	**M+H seq**	**Total M seq**
Swanee 1919 CR	1	0	1
Do It Again 1922 FD	1	0	1
I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise 1922 GWS	0	0	0
Somebody Loves Me 1924 GWS	1	0	1
Fascinating Rhythm 1924 LBG	0	1	1
The Man I Love 1924 LBG	1	0	1
Oh, Lady, Be Good! 1924 LBG	1	0	1

[45] Charles Hamm argues for Kern's melodic mastery and ability to "create tunes that progress, move, rise to peaks, and descend from those so naturally and effectively that his technique, mastered over so many years of apprenticeship, passes unnoticed" (Hamm, *Yesterdays*, 345). Simplicity of the underlying harmonic progression may enhance the sense of a melody's "natural and effective" contour.

The Half of It, Dearie Blues 1924 LBG	1	0	1
Sweet and Low-down 1925 TT	2	0	2
That Certain Feeling 1925 TT	3	0	3
Clap Yo' Hands 1926 OK	2	0	2
Do, Do, Do 1926 OK	1	0	1
Fidgety Feet 1926 OK	1	0	1
Maybe 1926 OK	1	0	1
Oh, Kay! 1926 OK	1	0	1
Someone To Watch Over Me 1926 OK	1	1	2
Strike Up the Band 1927 SUB	0	2	2
The Babbitt and the Bromide 1927 FF	2	0	2
Funny Face 1927 FF	1	0	1
High Hat 1927 FF	1	0	1
How Long Has This Been Going On? 1927 FF	0	1	1
Let's Kiss and Make Up 1927 FF	1	1	2
My One and Only 1927 FF	0	0	0
S Wonderful 1927 FF	1	0	1
Rosalie 1928 R	1	1	2
I've Got a Crush on You 1930 SUB	0	0	0
Bidin' My Time 1930 GC	0	0	0
But Not For Me 1930 GC	1	0	1
Embraceable You 1930 GC	1	0	1
I Got Rhythm 1930 GC	1	0	1

Love Is Sweeping the Country 1931 OTIS	0	0	0
Of Thee I Sing (Baby) 1931 OTIS	1	0	1
Who Cares? 1931 OTIS	1	0	1
Isn't It a Pity? 1932 PME	1	1	2
Mine 1933 LEEC	0	1	1
By Strauss 1936 TSIO	0	1	1
Let's Call the Whole Thing Off 1936 SWD	0	1	1
Slap That Bass 1936 SWD	0	0	0
They All Laughed 1936 SWD	0	1	1
They Can't Take That Away from Me 1936 SWD	0	0	0
A Foggy Day 1937	2	0	2
Nice Work if You Can Get It 1937 DD	1	0	1
Things Are Looking Up 1936 DID	0	2	2
Love Is Here to Stay 1937 GF	1	0	1
Love Walked In 1937 GF	1	0	1
		TOTAL:	50

TABLE 1. First column: Gershwin songs. Second column: number of melodic, non-harmonic sequences. Third column: number of melodic, harmonic sequences. Fourth column: total melodic sequences.

KERN – date – abbreviated show title	**Only M seq**	**M+H seq**	**Total M seq**
How'd You Like to Spoon With Me? 1905 EG	1	0	1
They Didn't Believe Me 1914 GU	1	0	1
Till the Clouds Roll By 1917 OB	1	0	1
The Siren's Song 1917 SS	1	0	1
Cleopatterer 1917 SS	2	0	2
Look for the Silver Lining 1920 Sa	0	0	0
Whip-Poor-Will 1920 Sa	1	0	1
Ka-lu-a 1921 GMD	1	1	2
Sunny 1925 Su	2	0	2
Who? 1925 Su	0	0	0
Bill 1927 SB	1	0	1
Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man 1927 SB	3	0	3
Make Believe 1927 SB	2	0	2
Ol' Man River 1927 SB	1	0	1
Why Do I Love You? 1927 SB	0	0	0
You Are Love 1928 SB	1	0	1
Don't Ever Leave Me 1929 n/a	1	0	1
Why Was I Born 1929 SA	0	0	0
She Didn't Say "Yes" 1931 CF	0	1	1
The Night Was Made For Love 1931 CF	0	1	1
I've Told Ev'ry Little Star 1932 MA	2	0	2
The Song Is You 1932 MA	5	0	5

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes 1933 R	2	0	2
The Touch of Your Hand 1933 R	1	1	2
Yesterdays 1933 R	0	1	1
I Won't Dance 1934 MAf	1	0	1
Lovely to Look At 1935 LLf	0	0	0
I Dream Too Much 1935 IDTMf	2	0	2
A Fine Romance 1936 STf	4	0	4
Pick Yourself Up 1936 STf	1	2	3
The Way You Look Tonight 1936 STf	3	0	3
The Folks Who Live on the Hill 1937 HWHf	2	0	2
Can I Forget You 1937 HWHf	0	0	0
You Couldn't Be Cuter 1938 JLf	2	1	3
All the Things You Are 1939 VWM	0	3	3
Sure Thing 1939 CGf	2	1	3
Remind Me 1940 ONTf	1	1	2
The Last Time I Saw Paris 1940 LBGf	0	0	0
Dearly Beloved 1942 YWNLf	0	0	0
I'm Old Fashioned 1942 YWNLf	1	1	2
You Were Never Lovelier 1942 YWNLf	2	0	2
Can't Help Singing 1944 CHSf	1	1	2
Long Ago (And Far Away) 1944 CGf	1	0	1
In Love in Vain 1946 CSf	1	0	1
All Through the Day 1946 CSf	1	0	1

		TOTAL:	69

TABLE 2. First column: Kern songs. Second column: number of melodic, non-harmonic sequences. Third column: number of melodic, harmonic sequences. Fourth column: total melodic sequences.

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ABSTRACT

Melodic sequences can create musical unity, enhance extra-musical drama, and make a piece memorable. In constructing their popular songs for Broadway and Hollywood, Gershwin and Kern both employed melodic sequences, but did so in mutually differing ways. This article opens with a broad-brushed comparison between the composers' most popular songs and finds that Kern had a greater predilection for sequences than did Gershwin. Next, I closely analyze several songs by each composer in order to specify differences between the two songsmiths' approaches to sequence. It is determined that Gershwin often reserves melodic sequence for musical climaxes, whereas Kern tends to open his songs with sequences. Finally, the article's findings are used to critique a strand of Gershwin reception that views his songs as dry or academic.

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