

Analyzing Eastern and Western Musical Elements in *Pacific Overtures*

Pacific Overtures is a musical about the opening of Japan to the West in 1853 by Commodore Perry and the country's subsequent modernization, as told from the perspective of the Japanese living at the time. Stephen Sondheim has mentioned that his underlying conceit while composing the music and lyrics was to write from the perspective of an imaginary Japanese playwright fully versed in the American musical tradition.¹ Because the theme and characters of *Pacific Overtures* demanded an Eastern style of understated simplicity, Sondheim faced the challenge of writing in an unfamiliar idiom far removed from those of his previous efforts. In this essay, I will examine how Sondheim was able to reconcile Eastern influences with his own Western musical training by analyzing the three songs that I feel best represent this musical as a songwriting tour de force: "Chrysanthemum Tea," "Someone in a Tree," and "A Bowler Hat."

Sondheim's main inspiration for creating the overall sound of *Pacific Overtures* came directly from traditional Japanese music itself, with its pentatonic melodies and free-flowing rhythms, and traditional Japanese poetry, with its brevity unhurried pace. While the simplicity of Sondheim's quasi-pentatonicism gives the music an Eastern character on the surface, his constant key modulations and superimposed scales evoke Japan's struggle to hold onto its past even as it is forced

¹ Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 210.

to modernize. Combined with intervening areas of unmistakable chromaticism, the message of the musical is quite clear that modernity will always involve some irreparable loss of tradition.

Another inspiration for musical material came from Spanish Andalusian composer Manuel de Falla, whose guitar-based chord clusters pointed the way for a synthesis between Eastern and Western musical traditions.² Falla's influence is most evident in "Chrysanthemum Tea," which takes place in the Shogun's palace as Commodore Perry's warships loom in the distance. The Americans have just delivered a message threatening to shell the city if demands to meet with the Shogun remain unmet, and the Shogun's mother continuously implores her son to seek counsel from soothsayers and priests. These efforts yield no results, however, and the Shogun, paralyzed with indecision, returns each time to whiling away in joyless leisure. Finally, on the fourth day, the exasperated mother poisons her son, reasoning that the Americans cannot fault the Shogun for ignoring their letter if he is dead.³

The two-bar cello motif shown in Figure 1a that serves as the refrain and underpins the melody in the verse of "Chrysanthemum Tea" is reminiscent of flamenco guitar, a musical style native to Falla's Andalusia. The open strings of the guitar, arranged in mostly ascending fourths as EADGBE, form the pentatonic key of G. The flamenco guitarist combines open-string drones with chromatic modulations,

² Zadan, 211.

³ Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 311. Interestingly, Sondheim gives no pretense about having based "Chrysanthemum Tea" on Eastern filial relations, referring to it as "essentially a Jewish mother song."

however, by fingering chords in the left hand and shifting them up and down the fretboard. Sondheim recreates this effect in the cello motif by playing an open fifth of D to A for the first two quarter notes of the measure, then transposing up a half step and playing $E\flat$ to $B\flat$ for the next two quarter notes, evoking the D-Phrygian scale.



Figure 1a: Cello motif in "Chrysanthemum Tea"

While the Phrygian nature of this flatted second is a signature of flamenco music, its sharp clash between pentatonicism and chromaticism works equally well for capturing the idea of a placid East being threatened by the West. The underlying tension between tonic and flatted second in this motif is developed even further with the introduction of the words "my Lord," sung by the Shogun's mother on $E\flat$, disrupting the D-Phrygian mode being sounded by the cello. After the mother succeeds in rousing the Shogun from his idleness above the din of his wife's caterwauling, she beseeches him to take action with an unwavering pattern of alternating upper and lower neighbor tones centered on a monotone A, ending each phrase with the same insistent "my Lord" in $E\flat$, as shown in Figure 1b. Even so, the cello motif continues underneath, and it is only after the Shogun is treated to some chrysanthemum tea that a G-minor ninth chord can shake him from his D-Phrygian stupor.

(MOTHER:)

It's the Day of the Rat, my Lord. There are four days re-main-ing, and I

see you're en - ter - tain - ing, but we should have a chat, my Lord.

Strs. + Xylo.

The image shows two systems of musical notation. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The first system is labeled '(MOTHER:)' and contains the lyrics 'It's the Day of the Rat, my Lord. There are four days re-main-ing, and I'. The second system contains the lyrics 'see you're en - ter - tain - ing, but we should have a chat, my Lord.' and includes the instruction 'Strs. + Xylo.' below the piano part. The piano accompaniment features a complex, fluctuating rhythm with various note values and rests, and a melodic line in the right hand that often moves in descending triplets.

Figure 1b: Shogun's Mother in "Chrysanthemum Tea"

The song is in varied rondo form, with the four instances of the recurrent theme, representing four consecutive days, separated by three contrasting episodes during which the Shogun and his mother first consult soothsayers and then Confucian priests, before finally resorting to prayer. Each time, the futility of the situation is revealed by the underlying music. The first contrasting episode involves the soothsayer, whose alternation between A and B \flat recalls the D-Phrygian cello motif, and whose descending triplets resemble the melody sung by the wife, both of which are shown in Figure 2a. Meanwhile, the fluctuating meter and unsettled rhythms convey a birdbrained mindset in perfect keeping with the rest of the Shogun's flighty court.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'WIFE:' and features a melody in 4/4 time with four groups of triplets. The lyrics 'Ahh' and 'ahh,' are written below the notes. The bottom staff is labeled 'SOOTHSAYER:' and features a melody in 3/4 time with six groups of triplets. The lyrics 'Ahh,' 'Ahh,' 'Wood star,' and 'Wa - ter star...' are written below the notes.

Figure 2a: Wife and Soothsayer in "Chrysanthemum Tea"

In the second contrasting episode, the Confucians blissfully reason that since "no foreign ships can break our laws" and "our laws are sacred," therefore "it follows there can be no ships." Each of their three lemmas begins with the two priests singing in turn, then closes with a melodic descent harmonized a perfect fourth apart in the key of D major, alternating between 4/4 and 6/4 time signatures as shown in Figure 2b. The third and final contrasting episode finds the entire court praying for a divine wind to destroy the American warships, with a variation on the soothsayer's melody that alternates between E and F and begins in 7/8 meter before shifting to 3/4.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'PRIEST I:' and features a melody in 6/4 time. The lyrics 'That mere-ly is il - lu - sion...' and 'The moon is sa - cred.' are written below the notes. The bottom staff is labeled 'PRIEST II:' and features a melody in 6/4 time. The lyrics 'Night wa - ters do not break the moon.' and 'The moon is sa - cred.' are written below the notes.

Figure 2b: Confucian Priests in "Chrysanthemum Tea"

All of these episodes contrast markedly against the recurrent theme sung by the Shogun's mother, whose pragmatic and determined nature is revealed through

her unwavering commitment to the diatonic scale of D minor and a steady pulse in 4/4 meter. However, upon the Shogun's death, she and the physician mimic the Confucian priests' perfect-fourth harmonies as they sing a fatalistic quasi-haiku, "The blossom falls on the mountain. The mountain falls on the blossom. All things fall." While this melody is more soaring than the fluttering descents sung by the Confucians, the harmonic similarity is unmistakable. In the end, then, the mother's pragmatism cannot transcend her insular Japanese worldview, and she too is helpless to defend against the new arrivals from the West.

Sondheim considers "Someone in a Tree" to be his favorite song of all those he has written, explaining, "What I love is its ambition, its attempt to collapse past, present, and future into one packaged song form."⁴ While "Chrysanthemum Tea" is an organic blend of Eastern and Western sounds due to the underlying influence of Manuel de Falla, "Someone in a Tree" represents a synthesis of two distinct cultures and therefore comes closer to the musical's underlying spirit of having been written by a Japanese playwright familiar with the American musical tradition. While its music feels like an Eastern interpretation of Western harmonic and rhythmic idioms, its narrative structure feels like a Western interpretation of the Eastern view of space and time. Indeed, Sondheim's intent to capture the subjectivity of multiple perspectives has been compared to Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*.⁵

Despite its melodic homogeneity and long durations centered on a single harmony, "Someone in a Tree" maintains a remarkably dynamic flow due to its

⁴ Sondheim, 323.

⁵ Steve Swayne, *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 173.

periodic key modulations. It begins in the key of $E\flat$ major, with the narrator lamenting that no Japanese accounts exist of the historical day in 1853 when their insular nation finally signed a treaty opening trade relations with the West. An old man approaches, however, and informs the narrator that he had witnessed the event as a young boy, having climbed a tree near the treaty house. The key modulates up a whole step to F major, suggesting the narrator's piqued interest. The young boy then appears onstage, and a duet with his older self begins. The old man and young boy banter playfully across the temporal gap, with the boy precociously correcting the old man's fuzzy memory, and the old man reminding us to take into account the boy's youthful lack of perspective.

Halfway through the song, a samurai appears beneath the treaty house, having been stationed there to burst through the floorboards and attack the Americans should the signal be given. He enters in the key of G major, but is ignored and the music continues in F major as the old man and his younger self prattle on unawares. After eight bars, the samurai reasserts his presence, and this time is successful in keeping the music in G major. The last modulation is to the key of D major, this time only one fifth away rather than the customary two, suggesting that the song has finally settled on a comfortable tonal center. While the young boy sees what is happening in the treaty house but cannot hear, the samurai explains that he can hear but cannot see. Together with the old man, they piece together their fragmented recollections to recall the events of that day.

Sondheim's compositions often make use of simple motivic kernels that are permuted and arranged in a manner that reveals development across the structure

of the piece.⁶ This creative *modus operandi* is on full display in "Someone in a Tree," where the generative kernel is an ascent of a third followed by a descent of a whole step introduced in the first line sung by the old man, "Pardon me, I was there," as shown in Figure 3a. At various times this kernel is inverted, retrograded, and mutated, as shown in Figure 3b, although of course it must be kept in mind that such permutations are overdetermined by the fixed diatonic character of the entire piece.



Figure 3a: Generative kernel in "Someone in a Tree"

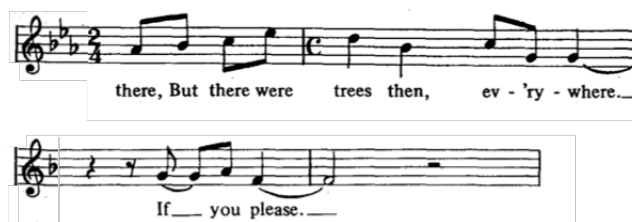


Figure 3b: Some permutations of the generative kernel

In crafting the harmonic world of *Pacific Overtures*, Sondheim claims to have consciously avoided thirteenth chords.⁷ Yet despite the quasi-pentatonic feel of "Someone in a Tree," its harmonic clusters unmistakably bear his signature. Close examination reveals why this is the case: the chords employed certainly *are* elevenths and thirteenths, but with the removal of certain pitches, their "jazzy" character is lost, leaving only pentatonic stacks of fourths. For example, Figure 4a

⁶ Swayne, 101-103.

⁷ Swayne, 82.

shows an eleventh chord rooted on G, with pitches A and D removed. The result is a cluster containing the pitches G, B \flat , C, and F, which ambiguously belongs to either F or B \flat pentatonic collections. Chordal harmonies with an Eastern flavor can also be heard when the old man and the boy sing in perfect-fifth harmonies, as shown in Figure 4b.



Figure 4a: Pentatonic harmonies in "Someone in a Tree"



Figure 4b: Old Man and Young Boy in "Someone in a Tree"

Sondheim has noted that just as Japan is the ultimate minimalist culture, "Someone in a Tree" contains traces of minimalism in its rhythmic structure, including steady rhythms and phase shifts.⁸ While the undercurrent of accents on the second beat and the eighth-note upbeat to the fourth beat shown in Figure 5a is retained throughout, its distribution across a wide panoply of pitched and percussive instruments helps to maintain listener interest. Meanwhile, an example

⁸ Mark Eden Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 157-158.

of phase shift occurs in Figure 5b. The old man begins recollecting with the words "I am in a tree" on the third beat of the first bar, singing a melodic string of four eighth notes C-D-F-D that ends on an F of longer duration. He then reminds us that "I am ten" before ending his line by repeating "I am in a tree" to the same melodic string, this time shifted to the first beat of the third bar. The effect is one of a quasi-haiku, lending the satisfying impression that the old man is in deep reflection despite the childish simplicity of his words.



Figure 5a: Metric accents in "Someone in a Tree"

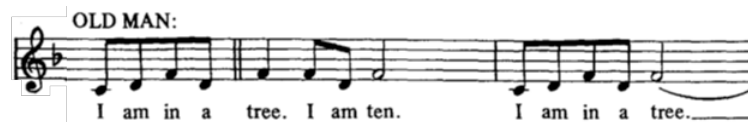


Figure 5b: Phase shift in Old Man's vocal melody

"A Bowler Hat" takes place over the course of fifteen years, during which the two friends Kayama and Manjiro diverge as individuals as they take separate paths in the face of Japan's increasing accommodation to the West. Kayama, the one who is singing, gradually becomes more and more Westernized in his habits over the course of the song. His brush is replaced with a steel pen, his table is replaced with a secretary desk and revolving chair, and he adopts Western accouterments such as a

pocket watch and a monocle. Meanwhile, his friend Manjiro silently conducts a tea ceremony on the opposite end of the stage, unchanged in his daily rituals over the years even as stagehands continue to add lines to his face.

Of all the songs to be written for *Pacific Overtures*, "A Bowler Hat" presented the most opportunity for Sondheim to play up the differences between Eastern and Western musical elements, so it seems curious that this contrast is not more vividly presented, or that a gradual progression from Eastern to Western sounds, reflecting Kayama's transformation, was not attempted. The song remains in 3/4 meter throughout, with a simple structure that alternates between verses in the key of C minor and instrumental refrains that explore chromaticism further. I can find no reasonable explanation for this relative lack of ambition on the part of Sondheim except to note his extreme satisfaction with John Weidman's prose and Harold Prince's staging in establishing the song's theme and narrative.⁹ Perhaps he feared that a more musically adventurous sound would upstage this quietly elegant combination?

In any case, like "Chrysanthemum Tea," the verse in "A Bowler Hat" is undergirded by a repetitive two-bar motif, shown in Figure 6a. The cello and bass alternate between C and G, implying a tonal center of C minor, while the clarinet and harp play seven notes that exhaust the C-minor diatonic collection. The melodic kernel first begins on G and twice rises a fourth, to C and then to F. Next, it falls down a third twice, first to D and then to B \flat . Finally, it rises another two fourths, to E \flat and then to A \flat . This shaky, overall ascent perhaps symbolizes the unsteady

⁹ Sondheim, 328.

progress that characterized Japan's growth in the immediate years after the treaty, as evinced by one of Kayama's letters to Abe when he writes, "[The Western merchants] import goods we do not need, and export those we cannot do without." Indeed, while Kayama's vocals aspire to soar, he can only do so by undulating between short rises and falls, such as the passage shown in Figure 6b.



Figure 6a: Central motif in "A Bowler Hat"



Figure 6b: Kayama in "A Bowler Hat"

Rhythmically, the passage in Figure 6b is also interesting for the hemiola that results from a half-note pulse in the melody being pitted against a triple meter. However, this half-note duration is sung as a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note and thus resembles the accented pattern of triple meter, even as it attempts to break out of it. Similarly, even as Kayama attempts to break away from traditional Japanese culture, reasoning that "one must keep moving with the times," he is still irrevocably Japanese in the poetic nature of his contemplation. As he

boasts, "The swallow flying through the sky is not as swift as I am flying through my life," the listener cannot help but notice that he resorts to a traditional subject commonly found on Japanese screen prints for his metaphor, rather than to any of the fancy new gadgets or furnishings cluttering his home.

During the refrains in which the narrator recites Kayama's letters to Abe, both the solo instruments and the underlying harmonies seem to push outward from the diatonic key of C minor, as if exploring the newfound possibilities for chromatic inflection afforded by Western music. In the first, third, and fifth refrains, the harmony instantly shifts to a major-seventh chord rooted in C, which necessitates changing both B \flat to B \natural and E \flat to E \natural . In the second and fourth refrains, the harmony modulates from C minor to the relative key of E \flat major, then gradually adds the chromatic tones of D \flat and A \natural to create a tonal center that seems to modulate from B \flat minor to A minor. These chords hold no real harmonic function, of course, but are simply byproducts of chromatic exploration.

The diversity of ways in which Eastern and Western musical elements are juxtaposed and contrasted in *Pacific Overtures* reflects Sondheim's flexibility as a composer. While "Chrysanthemum Tea" is indebted to a serendipitous encounter with the sound of Manuel de Falla, "Someone in a Tree" is a classic Sondheim number in the way it intricately weaves together multiple characters and plotlines. And finally, "A Bowler Hat" is a testament to Sondheim's ability to pull back in the music what is already being revealed elsewhere in the drama. All told, *Pacific Overtures* is one more testament that Sondheim's creative approach cannot be reduced to a simple formula.

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