

“Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street” (Original Cast Recording) (1979)

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Essay by: Robert L. McLaughlin (guest post)*



Angela Lansbury, Len Cariou



Original album



Stephen Sondheim

Between 1970 and 1981, composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim, director Harold Prince, and their collaborators created six Broadway musicals that in many ways reinvented the genre. These musicals—“Company” (1970), “Follies” (1971), “A Little Night Music” (1973), “Pacific Overtures” (1976), “Sweeney Todd” (1979), and “Merrily We Roll Along” (1981)—introduced a new seriousness of subject matter, challenged the conventions of the traditional musical, experimented with form and style, and embraced a sophistication in the music and a precision in the lyrics that had only rarely been heard on Broadway before. While these musicals confounded many contemporary reviewers, over time they have been recognized for the important works they are, and most critics would rank “Sweeney Todd” as the masterpiece of the group.

“Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street,” to which title Sondheim appended the descriptor “A Musical Thriller,” opened at the Uris (now Gershwin) Theater on March 1, 1979, after a month of previews. The legend of a malevolent barber who murders his customers, often just-paid sailors returning from long sea voyages, and his helpful neighbor who uses their bodies for the filling of her meat pies originated in the popular penny dreadful serial “A String of Pearls” (1846-1847). “Sweeney” scholar Robert L. Mack speculates that the reason this story made such an impact is that it spoke to the cultural anxieties of the industrial revolution, particularly the migration from rural areas to urban areas, in which individuals from small towns and farms seemed to be swallowed up into the anonymous crowds of the city. For whatever reason, Sweeney’s story spread through several novelistic knock-offs, many stage adaptations, and eventually film versions, including two silents and Tod Slaughter’s 1936 re-creation of his stage success.

Sondheim was inspired to write his musical after seeing Christopher Bond’s 1973 reimagining of the story. Bond gave Sweeney a backstory and a motive beyond greed for his murderous ways—revenge. In the musical adaptation by Sondheim and book writer Hugh Wheeler, Sweeney returns to London after having been transported to Australia fifteen years earlier by a lecherous

judge and his obsequious beadle. Having been rescued in his escape attempt by a naïve but virtuous sailor, Anthony Hope, Sweeney plans to reunite with his wife, Lucy, and daughter, Johanna, but learns from Mrs. Lovett, whose bakeshop is in the building where his barbershop used to be, that the judge raped Lucy, leading to her suicide, and adopted Johanna. This news changes Sweeney's goal from a reunited family to revenge. When his attempt to kill the judge is thwarted, Sweeney goes mad and vows to take his revenge on all mankind, slitting the throats of his customers randomly and ruthlessly. Mrs. Lovett comes up with the bright idea of disposing of the bodies by baking them into meat pies. As a result, the demand for her pies is soon more than she can handle, and business booms. Despite the several subplots—the judge proposing marriage to Johanna; Johanna and Anthony planning to elope; Pirelli, a rival barber, attempting to blackmail Sweeney; Toby, a lad taken in by Mrs. Lovett, suspecting Sweeney's secret; and a mad and wretched beggar woman who seems always to be lurking at the edge of the action—Sweeney obsessively pursues his project until both the beadle and judge are dead, but so is Mrs. Lovett, whom Sweeney pushes into her own oven after he discovers that she had lied to him and that the beggar woman he had so casually killed was his wife Lucy.

Sondheim was drawn to the tale's representation of obsession. Sweeney, monomaniacally pursuing his desire for perfect narrative closure—either reunion with his family or revenge against the judge—becomes blind to everything else and ends thwarted, confused, and denied any closure but death. Mrs. Lovett, pursuing material wealth and commercial success, requires a perpetually deferred desire—the cycle of customers, bodies, and meat pies. When the two desires overlap, the unholy couple instantiate a model of the industrial-age worldview, dehumanizing other people and turning them into objects that serve their obsessions: revenge and money. It's this last aspect that drew Prince to the musical. He felt that the conditions the industrial revolution imposed on the underclass reduced them to their functions as labor, consumers, and/or product, functions represented by Mrs. Lovett's meat-pie cycle. The powerlessness that resulted from such conditions is the ground in which rage like Sweeney's grows. To emphasize this idea, Prince had set designer Eugene Lee reconstruct a nineteenth-century iron foundry on the stage of the Uris.

“Sweeney Todd” makes use of several theatrical traditions and styles, including melodrama, Grand Guignol, Brechtian epic theater, ballad opera, and British music hall. Sondheim has described his score as being like the soundtrack to a classic horror film. He has also said that the score is something of a tribute to Bernard Hermann, composer of the scores for “Hangover Square,” one of Sondheim's favorite movies, and many of Alfred Hitchcock's films. (He makes use of Hermann chords throughout—listen, for example, to the “Psycho”-inspired strings near the beginning of “Epiphany.”) Although the play is not sung through—there are many sections of dialogue—the orchestra plays almost continually; its relentlessness helping create and sustain the suspense and then punctuating the moments of horror. “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,” with its menacing and driving accompaniment, helps structure the narrative, opening the play, recurring periodically to comment on the action, and then serving as the finale. Sondheim also provided each character with a motif (the beggar woman's melody is one of the most important) that help hold together the narrative and its subplots and eventually come together dialogically in the final sequence.

Produced by Thomas Z. Shepard and conducted by Paul Gemignani for RCA Records, the original cast album was recorded on March 12 and 13, 1979, less than two weeks after the Broadway opening. A rare-for-the-time double album, the recording includes virtually all the show's sung music and much of the underscoring and dialogue. It preserves the uniformly excellent performances of Len Cariou (Sweeney), Angela Lansbury (Mrs. Lovett), Victor Garber (Anthony), Sarah Rice (Johanna), Edmund Lyndeck (Judge Turpin), Jack Eric Williams (Beadle Bamford), Ken Jennings (Toby), Joaquin Romaguera (Pirelli), and Merle Louise (Lucy). Among the ensemble were Cris Groenendaal and Betsy Joslyn, who would eventually take over the roles of Anthony and Johanna, and future playwright Craig Lucas. As is often the case for cast recordings, the pit orchestra of twenty-six was augmented by fourteen additional musicians. In order to enhance the sense of the recording as a theatrical experience, Shepard included a number of sound effects, including the shrill factory whistle that periodically punctuates the action and the sound of Sweeney's victims going from his barber chair, down a chute, and the floor of the bakeshop, the whoosh and plop moving eerily from one speaker to the other to suggest the stage movement. (Shepard used the same sound effect in the disco version of "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd" he produced for the Red Seals Disco label.)

Sondheim, Shepard, and Gemignani made several changes from the musical in performance for the recording. At least a few tempi were speeded up (see, for example, "The Worst Pies in London"), presumably to make up for the absence of stage movement and business. "By the Sea" was given a different orchestral conclusion; on stage, the song ended with Mrs. Lovett playing "Here Comes the Bride" on her harmonium. "Parlor Songs" was resolved here; on stage, Sweeney interrupted the beadle and Mrs. Lovett as they sang. Len Cariou sang the final line of "The Letter" (the signature: "Sweeney Todd"); on stage, the quintet sang the entire song while Cariou acted out writing and delivering the letter. Most important, sections of "The Contest," wherein Sweeney and Pirelli compete to see who can shave a man and pull a tooth most quickly, and Judge Turpin's "Johanna," which were cut during previews, were restored, although "Johanna" was moved from its show position (between "The Contest" and "Wait") to a spot that makes more narrative sense to a listener, right before Anthony and Johanna's "Kiss Me."

"Sweeney Todd" has had several subsequent recordings: the Barcelona cast recording, sung in Catalan (1995); a live recording of the New York Philharmonic concert production, starring George Hearn and Patti LuPone (2000); the second Broadway revival cast recording, starring Michael Cerveris and Patti LuPone (2005); the London revival recording, starring Michael Ball and Imelda Staunton (2012); and the Munich Radio Orchestra concert recording, sung in English (2012). The soundtrack of director Tim Burton's film version was released in 2007. Each of these recordings has its virtues and flaws, but none of them replaces the original cast recording as the definitive one.

Robert L. McLaughlin is professor of English at Illinois State University. He is the author of "Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical," and his work on Sondheim has appeared in "The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies" and the "Sondheim Review." He is the co-author (with Sally E. Parry) of "We'll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema during World War II" and editor of "Innovations: An Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Fiction." He is currently completing a study of American theater during World War II.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.