A Postdramatic Composer in Search of a Dramatic Aesthetic, or, the Apotheosis and Decline of Andrew Lloyd Webber

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Andrew Lloyd Webber has been associated with a type of musical theater that disregards the conventions of the character-driven musical play, offering, instead, a stream of impressive and loosely connected aural and visual images. His compositional method could be easily described as "postdramatic," prioritizing the audiovisual intensity of the individual dramatic moment, rather than its insertion into a coherent narrative structure. However, a closer reading of Lloyd Webber's musico-dramatic texts can reveal the composer's consistent effort to develop a more traditionally dramatic musical aesthetic. This experimentation with more dramatic models of musical composition produced Lloyd Webber's biggest commercial triumph, *The Phantom of the Opera,* but can also be considered responsible for his subsequent demise. The present paper will try to trace these developments in Lloyd Webber's compositional method, offering, at the same time, a sociological reading of his aesthetic that explains the reasons for the composer's vast popularity in postmodern culture as well as the reasons for his decline.

Andrew Lloyd Webber is the most successful composer/producer in the history of musical theater. His musicals have traveled all around the world, from the UK and the USA to Ireland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Sweden, Australia, Canada, Japan, China and South Africa. *Cats* (1981) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), his two mammoth international blockbusters, have been seen by more than one hundred million people and have taken in a cumulative gross of almost $7 billion. However, despite his unprecedented financial success and the adoration of the audience,

Lloyd Webber has been the subject of intense critical controversy. In Britain, where he was born and brought up, the critical response has been mostly divided, but, in the US, Lloyd Webber has been subjected to at times savage and humiliating criticism and has been largely dismissed as an opportunist, in spite of his impressive output, the development of a personal aesthetic and the consistency of his success over the years. Led by Frank Rich, chief drama critic of the prestigious *New York Times* throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, most of the Broadway musical "authorities" declared open war on Lloyd Webber, by consistently providing the most malicious reviews that a commercial composer/producer of his success and status has ever received.

One of the main reasons for this critical resentment is probably the fact that Lloyd Webber is a foreigner to American culture, who has dared dominate an art form, in which Americans have excelled for most of the twentieth century. During the so-called "golden" age of the Broadway musical, from the 1940s to the late 1960s, New York was the center of light musical entertainment, defining how a musical should sound or look. However, by the 1970s, the well-established formulas had grown rather stale, failing to pay off and leading Broadway into deep economic crisis. In the midst of this crisis, the so-called "British invasion" started, as a string of bewilderingly successful musicals by Lloyd Webber and his imitators took New York and the whole of the US by storm, becoming the biggest money-makers in the history of Broadway and using their American triumph as a ticket for their exportation all over the globe. These shows saved the economic fortunes of Broadway and, in the process, radicalized not only the economy of musical theatre, transforming it from a cottage industry into a multinational corporate enterprise with multimillion-dollar risks and multibillion-dollar gross potential, but also the aesthetic form of the Broadway musical. For many New York critics, the aesthetic trends introduced by Lloyd Webber's shows threatened the future of the American musical as an art form, which reached its peak, in their view, during the "golden" era with the shows of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein and their imitators.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's groundbreaking innovation consisted in making the musical a piece of dramatic merit, by perfecting the form of the book musical, which mixed a fully developed prose text (the book) with interpolated songs and dances. Before the advent of their shows, the book musical was characterized by a lack of musico-dramatic synthesis, as the tunes track and the prose sections constituted two different texts, running in parallel and intersecting in the most contrived and generic manner. Rodgers and

Hammerstein strengthened the dramatic links between the prose and musical sequences, by subjecting the formerly autonomous and anarchic musical numbers to a narratological necessity. Instead of writing generic pop songs to be clumsily interpolated in the dramatic text, they firmly anchored their numbers in the dramatic action, making them indispensable parts of a narrative totality. For this reason their musicals are praised for the high level of integration they exhibit, i.e. the synthesis of prose sequences, music and dance into an organic whole, with songs and production numbers contributing to the character and plot development. For the first time in the American musical's history, such traditional dramatic values as narrative coherence and character development become of paramount importance in a musical's composition. Moreover, with their shows, Rodgers and Hammerstein set the rules of a musical realism, by avoiding the cardboard characters and stock-in-trade situations of romantic operettas as well as the formulaic farcical patterns of musical comedies. Instead, they presented recognizable characters, whose life-stories constitute a coherent plot unfolding in a linear manner with all the separate episodes carefully and causally connected. The seriousness of the subject matter, the delicate balance between romance and comedy and the more rationalized use of melodramatic devices brought Rodgers and Hammerstein's shows closer to legitimate theater, and this is the reason why they were labeled as "musical plays."

For many critics, Lloyd Webber appeared as being on a mission to tear apart the well-made, integrated style of musico-dramatic composition that was popularized during the Broadway musical's "golden" era. Indeed, the strongly sustained narratives and the psychologically developed characters that typified Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical plays were never Lloyd Webber's strength. In his shows, characters acquire a deliberate one-dimensionality, as they are mostly well-known mythical, almost archetypal figures, while the metonymic network of causal and logical connections is reduced to the minimum, so that the linear development of the narrative loses its accumulative force. One of the main reasons why the narrative structure of his shows appears to be too elliptical is that Lloyd Webber systematically avoids the use of prose sections. In the Broadway musicals of the "golden" era, the prose sequences were responsible for introducing characters, communicating background information and setting up dramatic conflict; for establishing, in other words, a network of causal connections between the musical numbers, which were mainly employed for providing psychic close-ups in the characters' inner life and exploring interpersonal relations in highly emotional moments of dramatic crisis. Instead of this delicate bal-

ance between prose and musical sections, Lloyd Webber offers a musical collage of strophic songs and recycled melodic fragments from his main set-pieces for the creation of a pop-operatic effect. Lloyd Webber is of course notorious for conceiving himself as a modern opera composer. However, despite their continuous musicalization of dramatic action, his shows cannot be easily categorized as operas—not only because of their avoidance of the complexities of classical musical composition in favor of pop conciseness and straightforwardness, but also because of their outward dramatic shape.

Lloyd Webber avoids the use of recitative, the musically enhanced, and rather awkward, intoned speech, used for character and narrative exposition in various operatic forms. He may use it sporadically, just to add an operatic touch to his works, but it never becomes one of his main structural devices. Instead, he prefers a pop-friendly speech-in-music, achieved mainly through the repetition of his ear-catching focal melodies, which are often insistently, even obsessively, restated, defying any sense of musico-dramatic subtlety. Moreover, in contrast to the operatic mode of dramatic representation, which conceives action in terms of moments of crisis and high conflict, explored in large, static and single dramatic units, the individual acts or extended scenes, his musicals favor an epic, panoramic, cinematic mode of representation that is more extensive than intensive. Instead of concentrating on a few selected moments of interpersonal conflict, Lloyd Webber's shows consistently try to expand their scale of reference through the kaleidoscopic representation of whole civilizations and historical eras or through the cataclysmic dramatization of epic-sized plots in a series of miniscule and self-contained musical sequences. As the sweeping action is matched to a string of pop songs in their fully developed or fragmented form, an excessively fetishistic musico-dramatic structure is created; one that offers an anthology of brief but impressive melodic and dramatic moments to be consumed in their isolated splendor rather than in a linear-successive way.

Excessive fetishism is what defines Lloyd Webber as a composer, not only in terms of overall dramatic organization but also in terms of melodic phrasing, harmonic accompaniment and orchestration. He is particularly known for his so-called "Big Tunes:" luxurious power-pop ballads with dramatic upward key changes and lush harmonic resolutions, using the full power of an amplified, strings-filled orchestra, in order to attack the audience head on and bring the house down. The Big Tune fulfils to the extreme what Theodor Adorno defined as fetishism in popular music, the delight in the moment, the isolated moment of enjoyment (32); and it is exactly this

extremely fetishistic conception of musical composition that has made Lloyd Webber unwilling to subject his undeniable melodic gifts to narrative purposes. He often seems unable to postpone or sacrifice the pleasure in the present for the achievement of a narrative goal in the future, because he obviously does not believe in delayed gratification, which is the basic presupposition for composing a coherent musico-dramatic text. In the Webberian musical universe, every moment must be permeated by excessive enjoyment, so that his shows can move "from orgasm to orgasm," from one crescendo to the next: "Lloyd Webber treats his customers as if their enjoyment meant more to him than anything" (qtd. in Citron 189-91). In this way, he creates a musical theater, in which every individual moment realizes its full affective potential; and in such a kind of theater neither prose nor recitative can have a place. The opposition between prose and musical numbers or recitative and aria, in other words, the opposition between (musicalized) speech and proper vocal music, exists in order to distinguish the prosaic, the ordinary, the mundane from the emotional, the extraordinary, the extravagant. In Lloyd Webber's musicals, the prosaic, the ordinary, the mundane is an absent category; there is simply no moment that does not deserve his big melodies, his ear-catching refrains, his musical fetish objects.

Unavoidably, this musical fetishism usually leads to a fragmented dramatic structure, which often creates the impression that some of Lloyd Webber's shows are actually a throwback to older forms of non-integrated musical theater, like the revue, a form of variety entertainment that is structured around a series of sketches and musical numbers with minimum or no connection between them. For example, the narrative premise of *Cats*—all cats gather in order to decide which one will be reincarnated—operates as an excuse for a succession of autotelic and self-contained musical numbers, which present a series of amusing cat types, resembling recognizable human types, that create a fantasy universe of anthropomorphic felines. Similarly, *Starlight Express* (1984) unravels the universe of anthropomorphic trains in a series of loosely tied musical numbers that present various animated cyborg-like locomotives and coaches. In *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (1968), the Old Testament's well-known, inspirational story of Jacob's son, who is sold into a life of slavery by his jealous brothers but finally triumphs in Egypt due to his faith in God, is employed in the most cartoonish and generic manner and becomes the excuse for the insertion of various straight-forward pastiches of recognizable musical styles: from rock 'n' roll to vaudeville two-step and calypso and from country and western to French chançon and disco. Actually, *Joseph…* was the show that provided

the matrix for such revue-like shows like *Cats* and *Starlight Express*, which are also pastiche-driven; and this predilection for pastiche is definitely related to Lloyd Webber's fetishistic conception of musical composition. The effectiveness of pastiche depends on the audience's familiarity with a specific musical genre. This familiarity can reactivate automatically affective contexts associated with the genre and, thus, provoke an immediate audience response, which is what Lloyd Webber is always after.

This revue-like effect that permeates his pastiche-driven shows also characterizes other musicals, which on a surface level seem to be more organic and character-driven. For example, *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) is an account of the Holy Week, the last seven days of the life of Jesus Christ, that places the Son of God in a context full of overtones of the culture of the late 1960s and the early 1970s, in an attempt to put the ideologies of this historical period in a critical context. The show has a promising start as it appears to be structured around the opposition and clash between Jesus, who can be interpreted as an inspirational and deified modern guru or a contemporary rock god, in the style of John Lennon and Jim Morrison, and Judas, a nonconformist rebel without a cause, who attacks Jesus's aspirations to god-like status. His passionate attack is actually a warning of the dangers that the megalomaniac affirmation of a grandiose self poses, especially if it takes metaphysical proportions and is proposed as part of revolutionary politics. However, as the show goes on this tight focus on the two characters is lost and the scale of reference opens up in order to include many characters and incidents from the last days of Jesus on earth that are presented in a series of vignette-like, loosely connected musical numbers. As a result, the characters of Jesus and Judas remain underdeveloped and the show is transformed from a character piece into a vast and undeniably impressive panorama of the events that led to the crucifixion.

Similarly, *Evita* (1978), a musical biography of the (in)famous first lady of Argentina, is not an examination of the heroine's character but a collection of highlights from her life, strung together in an episodic, highly fragmented manner. This sweeping, panoramic method certainly does not enable the understanding of the central heroine, and so Eva Peron remains a mystery throughout the musical. Apart from her driving ambition and her insatiable narcissism, no other character trait, no other motivation is provided that could help the audience penetrate the psyche of a woman that provoked massive adoration and hatred in equal doses. What we get are all the scenes of Eva's massive apotheosis by her *descamisados* (the shirtless people) as well as the hysterical mourning that followed her death; the contempt and

the hatred the aristocracy and the military blocks exhibited towards her as well as her communicative power and her ability to manipulate thousands of people; the process of her sanctification by the children as well as her transformation into a Dior-clad, Hollywood-like glam icon and the aestheticization of her politics that made her a populist crypto-fascist. The epic size and scope of the musical is certainly breathtaking, but as a piece of drama *Evita* is too descriptive to create any tension. For this reason, the character of Che is introduced, vaguely alluding to Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who functions in Judas-like fashion as Eva's nemesis, trying to strip her of her sentimentality and expose her populism and fascism. However, Che never develops into a character and remains a scenic devise, an one-man-chorus that narrativizes and fast-forwards the action, acting like a camera lens zooming in and out of particular moments in Eva's life-story in order to provide obsessive framings within the flow of events.

However, all these characteristics of Lloyd Webber's overall dramatic organization that appear to be deficiencies at first glance (schematic narrative, telegraphic characterization, excessive fragmentation, lack of dramatic tension and epic expansion of the action) prove to be hidden assets as far as the staging of his shows is concerned. For example, Harold Prince, *Evita*'s director, immediately understood that the musico-dramatic text, with its frenetic musical montage and its sweeping presentation of a whole era, should not be treated as a conventional musical drama, but rather as a piece of documentary theater (Ilson 266). Using techniques from Erwin Piscator's epic/documentary drama, Prince tried to achieve a similar "global extension of his stage" (Innes 200) in order to provide a panoramic view of history and the representation of an epoch in its totality. In order to avoid cumbersome set changes that delay and confine the action, he replaced the conventional representational sets with abstract, constructivist scenic structures, moving bridges and platforms that enabled the representation of simultaneous and contrasting actions and created the sense of a shape-shifting stage area in continuous motion, constantly modified to keep pace with the cataclysmic succession of events. Film clips were projected on an enormous mobile movie screen to communicate the epic feeling, by augmenting and amplifying the events represented on stage, while the acting was extremely stylized, aiming at robbing the characters of their individuality and transforming them into vividly contrasting symbols of their era—Eva's fascism *vs.* Che's communism. The use of sound design was ingenious as Eva's voice echoing through the microphones in the political rallies and the roaring responses were hugely amplified, creating the impression of massed thousands and

communicating instantly and physically the power of the Perons' dema-
goguery (Gottfried 86). Overall, Prince created a theater of powerful im-
ages, exploiting Lloyd Webber's fetishistic and orgasmic method of musi-
co-dramatic composition to the maximum: he matched the composer's au-
ral fetish objects to a series of visual fetish objects, intricate tableaux pass-
ing before the eye in rapid succession, offering a visual plenitude that could
not be easily absorbed and digested.

Similarly, Tom O' Horgan in his staging of *Jesus Christ Superstar* em-
ployed a hallucinatory mise en scène, painterly light design, abstract and
symbolic set design and heavy amplification in order to create haunting au-
diovisual images of spiritual decay, grotesqueness, vulgarity and brutality,
portraying Jesus Christ as a contemporary mass idol, a phenomenal hit, a
mass media showstopper, glorified, deified and crucified by a civilization
desperate but unable to transcend its superficial material existence. He of-
fered a nightmarish combination of Cecil B. DeMille's biblical epics, Radio
City spectaculars, Folies Bergère and the "shock rock"/ "transvestite rock"/
"psychiatry rock" shows of Alice Cooper, attempting, just like Prince in
Evita, to create something more than a conventional musical show, an over-
whelming, intensely synaesthetic experience.

Of course, the show that established the Lloyd Webber musical as a
mega-event, less a theatrical performance than a roller-coaster ride, an over-
sized, overblown happening, was *Cats*. Director Trevor Nunn made sure that
the audience would not be allowed to be mere observers of a performance, but
they would be drawn into the production and have the feeling that they are
thrown in a totally new universe. This was achieved by making the theater an
all-encompassing environment, as John Napier's set design of a cosmic waste-
land was extended to the auditorium, so that the theater would become an
oversized junkyard, and the audience was set into motion, as sections of seat-
ing were transported around the auditorium. Moreover, *Cats*' abandonment of
realism and verisimilitude in favor of fantasy enabled a groundbreaking and
most powerful use of automated lighting, which could now capture the chang-
ing dynamics, moods and rhythms of the score, even within the same number,
creating ever-changing ethereal optical landscapes that multiplied the affec-
tive potential of the musical landscapes. Accordingly, sound was employed in
an equally groundbreaking manner, as the show was mixed in such a way as
to achieve a dynamic sound framing, so that the audience could feel the very
presence of the aural images and be enveloped in them in the same way they
were enveloped, or even overwhelmed, by the cascading visual images.

In its attempt to create an immersive audiovisual experience, *Cats* be-

comes the prototypical megamusical—the term that has been widely used by critics to label Lloyd Webber's shows. Megamusicals reconceive—through the use of cutting-edge technology that revolutionizes set, light and sound design—theatrical space as a hyperspace: an immense affective encompasser that transforms the viewing experience into a hypercharged thrill-ride and the spectator into an explorer of new and challenging aural and visual sensations. This hyperspatial anamorphosis of the theatrical environment must be seen as part of a larger process of hyperspatialization, which, for Fredric Jameson, is one of the defining characteristics of postmodern culture. Hotels, airports, restaurants, clubs and even the center of the city itself aspire to be total worlds, dreamlike, hallucinatory universes of affective plenitude, that embody the utopian prospect of "expand[ing] our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions" (Jameson 39). With the advent of large-scale architectural surfaces that animate solid architectural space with their restless, constantly changing imagery, the hyperspatial reconfiguration of public space makes the distinction between spectacle and spectator, fantasy and reality, art and life an obsolete one as social life itself approaches the form of "total theatre" (Baudrillard 71). For Jameson, this theatricalization, aestheticization and spectacularization of public space poses problems for temporal, syntagmatic, linear-successive organization in postmodern culture, as isolated experiences in the present, released by their connections to the past or their extensions to the future, "engulf the subject with undescribable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming" (Jameson 27).

With their systematic dislocation of narrative temporality and their intense concentration on an overwhelming dramatic present, Lloyd Webber's megamusicals become emblematic of the above, culturally dominant, hyperspatial mode of relating to the world—a fact that accounts for their immense success. His shows undermine the temporal, syntagmatic, linear-successive organizational logic of the more conventionally dramatic musical play, proposing, instead, a spatial, postdramatic mode of organization. Of course, the term "postdramatic" derives from Hans-Thies Lehmann, who has introduced the term in order to describe the "*visual dramaturgy*" (Lehmann 93) of postmodern performance art, which achieves the "retheatricalization" of theater through a renewed emphasis on the theatricality and materiality of the performance (51). Lehmann traces the origins of postdramatic performance in various forms of modernist and avant-garde theater that respond to the new "simultaneous and multi-perspectival form of perceiving" (16),

which emerges in the metropolitan centers of the Western world in the early twentieth century.[1] To accommodate the new mode of urban perception, theater abandons the more "centred" and "deeper" dramatic mode of organization, "whose primary model was the reading of literary texts" (16), and goes through a process of "epicization" (29): it expands its scale of reference in order to achieve an "epic plenitude of action" (43) through the fragmentation, acceleration and spatialization of dramatic action and the concomitant immersion of the spectator in a temporally disconnected dramatic present. This dramatic present acquires a new phenomenological richness in the more radically pictorial forms of modernist theater that pave the way for the more aggressively imagistic postdramatic performance art.

Lehmann's account of the rise of postdramatic theater is helpful for understanding the development of the aesthetic form of the modern musical throughout the twentieth century and evaluate Lloyd Webber's contribution to it. From the early decades of the twentieth century, musical theater undergoes a similar process of epicization, as it adopts the multi-scene dramatic structure, which results in the fragmentation of the action in rapidly changing scenes that, still, allow for a temporal, linear, traditionally dramatic organization, albeit of a more cinematic kind, perfected in the musical plays of Rodgers and Hammerstein. However, the development of musical theater in the twentieth century is coterminous with the further fragmentation of the action in even smaller dramatic cells, the musical numbers, which gradually replace the scene as the structural unit of musical theater. With the advent of the choreographer-directors of the 1950s and 1960s, the prose sequences are submerged, while the musical numbers absorb more and more narrative content in a rather telegraphic manner in order to become extended sequences alternating between song, snatches of dialogue, choreographed movement and proper choreography. Thus, the opposition between prose and musical numbers is gradually subverted and the musical tends to become a hyperkinetic organism, offering a new kind of affective

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1. For Walter Benjamin this new mode of urban perception is the outcome of the advent of a new spectacular social order, which transforms public space into a phantasmagoric, technologically-mediated three-dimensional stage, upon which the spectacle of consumer capitalism is enacted. This theorization of the spectacularization of public space makes Benjamin the first cultural critic to analyze extensively the origins of hyperspace (although he never used the exact term) in early twentieth-century culture. For more on Benjamin's theorization of the spatialization, theatricalization and aestheticization of human experience and its phenomenological and psychological implications, see Buck-Morss.

plenitude through the exploration of color, texture, rhythm and movement in a series of mobile and intricate audiovisual stage pictures. This goal is further achieved with the more conceptual directors of the late 1960s and 1970s, who rethink the musical stage in more pictorial terms, as a three-dimensional ever-evolving painting, and start using the scenery and the lights as interactive components of the stage action. The concept musicals are not simply written but visually conceived, achieving integration not on a linear, temporal, syntagmatic level but a vertical, spatial, paradigmatic one. The musical numbers are not so much parts of a narrative totality as of a total visual composition, more like an abstract painting turning the spectator's attention "no longer … to a meaning of the work that might be grasped by a reading of its constituent elements, but to the principle of construction" (Bürger 81).

The megamusicals further explore this mode of paradigmatic organization, by raising the previous experimentations to a new, more ambitious level, as the stage pictures are now gigantic and the canvas, on which they are painted, is vast. Lloyd Webber's predilection for epic subject matter, his penchant for equally epic-size aural imagery and the ability to write through-composed and excessively fetishistic scores that invite a more imagistic staging make him ideal for this kind of theater. Moreover, his tendency to think spatially during the process of musical composition and organize his scores paradigmatically explains his phenomenal success in a postmodern culture—a culture in which space becomes a cultural and existential dominant. His pastiche-driven shows constitute highly significant aural environments, in which various musical styles, overmythologized through their circulation in mass culture, constitute an intertextual web that opens up the play of signification and imagination, by allowing irreducible associations and combinations. His more unified scores offer even more coherently constructed aural environments, as they are paradigmatically organized around an overarching stylistic and/or thematic concept, like the combination of rock with a classical sound in *Jesus Christ Superstar* for the creation of a rock-operatic universe, which encapsulates in aural terms the show's organizing thematic concept: the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, the divine and the secular. All the above compositional characteristics make Lloyd Webber the quintessential postdramatic composer of musical theater and part of his critical dismissal derives from the fact that critics have consistently reviewed his shows with more conventionally dramatic evaluating standards than postdramatic ones, comfortably ignoring in the process that the megamusical's undermining of the traditional dramatic

organization has been an integral part of the history of the Broadway musical.

The negative critical reaction reached its apex with *Starlight Express*, which reconceived *Cats'* aggressively pictorial and environmental staging in such a gargantuan scale that did not fit anymore the confines of proscenium theater. In New York, the show's staging concept could not be fully realized, as the Nederlanders, who owned the Gershwin Theatre, where *Starlight Express* was staged, would not let their auditorium be torn apart, in the way Apollo Victoria Theatre's auditorium in London was, and be transformed into a gigantic roller skating arena. Unable to handle the controversy that the show created, Lloyd Webber denounced publicly *Starlight Express'* staging, showing in an embarrassing way that he was feeling uncomfortable with the unconventional aesthetic forms his compositions were inviting. It is probably for this reason that hereafter he started experimenting with more conventionally dramatic forms of musical theater; and the first indication of the new direction his theater was taking was his surprising announcement that the eagerly awaited *The Phantom of the Opera* would be a regression to the more traditionally dramatic stylistics of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

At first glance, the show looks like a typical Lloyd Webber megamusical, as the gothic melodramatic plot of Gaston Leroux's novel, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (1911), allows the composer to exploit his gift for melody to the maximum and, in true pop-operatic fashion, give us one Big Tune after the other. Moreover, the opera world of the late nineteenth century, the backdrop against which the gothic romance takes place, provides the opportunity for several pastiches of French romantic grand opera, classical opera and operetta. As every melodic or harmonic choice has to do with the world of opera, Lloyd Webber constructs one more total musical universe, an aural architecture, in which every phrase constitutes a portal to a different lush, extravagant soundscape, capturing all the passion, excess, doom and torment of the novel in impressive and unashamedly larger-than-life aural images, waiting for an equally impressive and larger-than-life visual interpretation. Prince, who directed once again, envisioned *The Phantom of the Opera* as a journey into an opulent and dangerous world of gothic grandeur, operatic excess and forbidden eroticism. His mise en scène almost resembles a tour to various locations of the Paris opera (the stage, the manager's office, the subterranean lake, the roof), all of them submerged in menacing expressionistic shadows and all providing the mysterious settings for enigmatically romantic images. The most famous of these images is, of course,

the lake scene, in which the Phantom and Christine, shrouded in an eerie mist, sail across a subterranean lake on a gondola, while dozens of glowing candles rise mysteriously out of the water.

However, amidst the kaleidoscopic succession of Victorian gothic imagery, one easily discerns Lloyd Webber's attempt to narrate a more traditional, dramatic fable and explore characters through more clearly defined and sustained narrative arcs. Lloyd Webber's attempt to subject his melodic gift to dramatic purposes affects significantly his compositional technique, which moves away from the excessive fragmentation of his previous musicals to a more organic direction. Instead of structuring his show around the relentless succession of his autotelic, frame-like set pieces, he now works with larger and more complex musico-dramatic units, in which fully developed numbers, recycled fragments and melodic motifs combine in order to create more extended musical scenes. This compositional technique is still cinematic enough to allow for the sweeping staging associated with Lloyd Webber's shows, but, at the same time, the significantly larger musical scenes enable the exploration of characters in more developed dramatic situations as well as the proper build-up of dramatic tension and climax. This sense of dramatic coherence is enhanced by the existence of a clearly defined syntagmatic axis that organizes the distribution and repetition of the musical material in its fully developed, fragmented or motivic form and prevents the obsessive and occasionally arbitrary recycling of his big melodies that plagued his previous shows. Characters, themes, attitudes or emotional states are meticulously identified with particular melodic phrases, which go through subtle alterations in key and orchestration and collide, combine and react with each other in new dramatic contexts in order to carry the action along, by producing new associations. This technique is definitely reminiscent of Wagner, but, as John Snelson points out, "[t]hose expecting something of the weight and ever-shifting fluidity of Wagnerian leitmotifs will be disappointed," since Lloyd Webber treats his themes more like "discrete blocks of sound to be reassembled in different patterns—like the bricks of a Lego kit" (Snelson 88). However, this up-front, fetishistic and pop-friendly use of the Wagnerian technique fits perfectly the fictive cosmos of the novel, which is full of big emotional gestures and polarized psychological states that can be adequately musicalized through the sensationalist and unexpected juxtapositions of the musical material rather than its thorough melodic, harmonic and rhythmic development.

Lloyd Webber's new techniques enable him to offer his first convincing musical portrayal of a character, the Phantom, who transforms from a

traditional gothic villain into a powerful source of identification: a tragic romantic lover, whose monstrous physical deformity condemns him to iso-lation and makes him unable to consume his relationship with Christine, the young soprano, who is both his muse and his sexual object of desire. What makes this transformation appear convincing is that Lloyd Webber never shies away from an aural representation of the Phantom as a psychotic vic-tim/victimizer and creates an occasionally raw, brutal, barbarous musical id-iom for his hero that expresses effectively all the ugliness, pain and suffer-ing that the civilized, nineteenth-century Parisian society refused to see. The modernist dissonance of this idiom, that alludes to Schönberg and Debussy, and its aggressive style of composition, which is reminiscent of Stravinsky (Snelson 116), contrast vividly with the ravishingly romantic melodies, which are used in order to delineate the Phantom's narcissistic identification with the idealized figure of the romantic lover and his yearning to be recog-nized as such by the social mainstream and his object of desire. It is the al-ternation between these two musical idioms that creates the dramatic tension in the key scenes that stage the Phantom's cruel shattering of his narcissis-tic illusions and contributes significantly to his convincing transformation into a complex, tortured and dark Romantic (anti)hero, closer to Heathcliff form *Wuthering Heights* than to pulp horror.

The above advancements in musical storytelling and characterization prevented *The Phantom of the Opera* from becoming just a theme-park recreation of gothic Victoriana and made it a moving piece of musical the-ater that combines the megamusical's panoramic succession of intricate stage imagery with traditional dramatic values. Encouraged by the unprece-dented success of the show, which became not only the most successful mu-sical of all time but also the most successful venture in the history of show-business in any medium, Lloyd Webber pursued further the development of a more dramatic musical aesthetic, producing some of his most daring and experimental, albeit flawed, works. With *Aspects of Love* (1989), based on David Garnett's novella that was inspired by the Bloomsbury group's tem-pestuous love lives, Lloyd Webber tried to create a Chekhovian, psycholog-ically complex musical, a character piece documenting how a small group of people fall in and out of love and hurt each other for almost two decades in their relentless pursuit of pleasure. However, the sensationalist reassem-bling and juxtaposition of his musical material, that fitted perfectly the heightened melodramatic universe of *The Phantom of the Opera*, failed to represent adequately the more psychologically complex characters of *Aspects of Love*. Their ambiguous motivations and unexpected sexual alliances

demanded a more psychologically penetrating and complex use of the leit-motif, whose lack makes this show, that aspired to be Lloyd Webber's most passionate, feel peculiarly uninvolving. With *Whistle Down the Wind* (1997), the composer abandoned his Chekhovian aspirations and attempted to musicalize a simpler story, based on Mary Hayley Bell's children's novel about youthful innocence, faith and idealism as contrasted to adult sterile rationalism and cynicism. However, Lloyd Webber's penchant for grandly orchestrated larger-than-life melodic statements (mis)led him to the composition of a rock-operatic score of occasionally Wagnerian proportions, interpreting aurally the central theme of religious faith in rather apocalyptic terms that contrasted uncomfortably with the simplicity of the story and the naiveté of its characters. A similar mismatch between the dramatic content and its musical representation also plagues *The Beautiful Game* (2000), a story of love and friendship across the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland. The thorny political issues that this musical deals with and the violence that permeates the story are at odds with Lloyd Webber's occasionally extravagantly romantic musical idiom.

From all the post-*Phantom* shows that move towards a more dramatic direction, the most satisfying one is *Sunset Boulevard* (1993), based on Billy Wilder's 1950 classic film noir about the dark side of Hollywood's industry of dreams. The operatic story of Norma Desmond, the middle-aged, self-obsessed, forgotten star of the silent era, who gradually descends into madness because she cannot accept that she has been brutally pushed aside by the studio system, fitted perfectly Lloyd Webber's grandiloquent musical stylistics. He conceived the show as a modern, adult version of *The Phantom of the Opera* and employed and further refined many of the compositional techniques he developed in this show, creating one of his tightest, coherent and most dramatically compelling musical scores. *Sunset Boulevard* benefited immensely from the involvement of an experienced dramatist, Christopher Hampton, who collaborated with lyricist Don Black, one of Lloyd Webber's frequent collaborators, in the dramatic adaptation of the movie and the writing of the lyrics. In the past, many critics had complained about the lyrics of Lloyd Webber's shows that seemed to be too generic, translating the composer's grand aural images in big encapsulating verbal images, which, nevertheless, seemed to be only peripherally related to the characters and the dramatic action. No such complaint could be made about *Sunset Boulevard*, as the lyrics are firmly anchored in the action and exhibit the penetrating psychological insight that characterized the lyric writing of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical plays.

In fact, *Sunset Boulevard* is the first Lloyd Webber megamusical that comes really close to the musical plays of Broadway's "golden" era, as the composer allows the extensive use of spoken dialogue, whose representational dynamics are further explored in *Whistle Down the Wind* and *The Beautiful Game*. The employment of prose sequences came as a welcome relief from the motivic extremes of *Aspects of Love*, where Lloyd Webber tended to fragment excessively his score and repeat insistently, and often with no dramatic justification, his melodic motifs in order to musicalize every line of dialogue. The use of spoken dialogue now allows him to be more economical and dramatically accurate in the recycling of his melodic material that moves away from *The Phantom of the Opera*'s pop-friendly appropriation of the Wagnerian leitmotif and comes closer to the more traditional reprising one finds in the musical plays of Rodgers and Hammerstein. However, the employment of prose sequences does not lead to the abandonment of Lloyd Webber's pop-operatic style of musico-dramatic composition, but rather to its refinement. *Sunset Boulevard* does not succumb to the rigid compartmentalization of musical and prose sequences, which characterizes the book musical, but rather accomplishes smooth transitions from spoken dialogue to recitative-like, melodically amorphous motifs, fully developed strophic numbers and recycled fragments from the melodic set-pieces. Lloyd Webber achieves this continuity between prose and music, by setting every prose line to underscoring music in order to make the instrumental orchestral accompaniment the driving force of the show, so that the sung lines can alternate swiftly and blend harmoniously with the spoken lines. In this way, the dialogue becomes a part of extended musical sequences, which allow for a more thorough exposition and development, but, at the same time, are fluid enough to create the total musical flow of grand aural images that is the trademark of the composer's pop-operatic, fetishistic and orgasmic mode of composition.

Most of these advancements largely went unnoticed by the majority of the critics, who mainly focused on Glenn Close's daring, nearly-psychotic portrayal of Norma Desmond in Los Angeles and New York, the backstage drama (Lloyd Webber fired two leading ladies under contract, Patti LuPone and Faye Dunaway) and Napier's epic-size sets. Napier designed for Norma's mansion on Sunset Boulevard a rococo architectural folly, whose monstrous monumentality, overblown size and blinding dazzle made it less the opulent Hollywood house of a film star and more a phantasmagoric recreation of a 1920s exotic movie palace, like the old Roxy theater, a modern Babylonian temple devoted to the worship of a pagan goddess. Napier's de-

sign was one of the main factors that raised the cost of the show to such heights that it failed to recoup its investment on Broadway, despite record-breaking advance sales and a two-and-a-half-years run in almost consistently packed houses. This failure, Lloyd Webber's second one in a row, coming after *Aspects of Love*'s loss of its entire investment on Broadway, signaled the end of the British invasion. Instead of becoming Lloyd Webber's next generation blockbuster, *Sunset Boulevard* came to represent the composer's downfall and is now remembered as a logistical nightmare and a symbol of excess, arrogance and decadence.

However, the recent minimalist and critically acclaimed West End revival of *Sunset Boulevard*, which opened in December 2008, saves the reputation of the show, by foregrounding its dramatic qualities, which were backgrounded during its initial run, as the monumental mobile scenic structures were dwarfing the actors and distracting the audience. Instead of searching for visual analogues for emotional grandeur, director Craig Revel Horwood communicates the operatic emotions of the story through a tight focus on the delivery of the musico-dramatic text, creating a claustrophobic psychological thriller of devastating emotional power. Michael Billington, in his rave review in *The Guardian*, praised the production for revealing a "more dramatic show that has been waiting for years to be let out." Indeed, the revival testifies to Lloyd Webber's growth as a musical dramatist, whose work has advanced so much towards a dramatic direction that he cannot achieve anymore the delicate balance between the megamusical and the musical play he achieved in *The Phantom of the Opera*. *Sunset Boulevard* is a dramatically tight and focused chamber opera, a scaled down character piece, which was overblown to gigantic proportions in order to meet (or better exceed) its predecessor's production standards and satisfy the audience's expectations. By contrast, *The Phantom of the Opera*, despite its subtler musical characterization and its more developed narrative arcs when compared to Lloyd Webber's previous shows, was primarily conceived in visual terms, and, for this reason, effortlessly spatialized dramatic action in order to include the various recreations of the nineteenth-century operatic repertory, the lake scene, the masked ball etc. The Disney megamusicals, which have dominated Broadway and the international market after Lloyd Webber's demise, perfected *The Phantom of the Opera*'s formula and offered even more pictorially aggressive scenic landscape structures, while at the same time they retained an elementary dramatic backbone. Compared to these shows, *Sunset Boulevard*, as well as most of Lloyd Webber's post-*Phantom* musicals, resemble, ironically, the critically acclaimed musical

plays of Stephen Sondheim, who has always been adored by the Broadway establishment and has been considered as the last link with the Rodgers and Hammerstein era and the antithesis of Lloyd Webber.

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