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Cole Porter – So In Love (revision.2)

Alec Wilder's succinct and thoughtful twenty-nine pages in the book, "American Popular Song The Great Innovators 1900-1950", a truly distinctive book, is possibly the only resource an inquisitive reader would need to procure passage into the stylized, and sophisticated world of Cole Porter. Using a composer's instinct and analytical skills, Wilder's short essay illuminates Porter's harmonic and melodic innovations, and provides insight into his lyrical genius.

Being both lyricist and composer is a unique quality that Cole Porter shares with a handful of other songwriters. Irving Berlin and Jimmy Webb, Paul Simon and Stephen Sondheim, are other singular talents that belong to this literary/musical society.

Porter's lyrics are brilliant to be sure. And they can at times favor a sophisticated "Eastside" sensibility of politeness and wit, which at that time was much in vogue with his crowd. Adopting this less direct approach his lyrics deflect over sentimentality.

Porter can also be quite straightforward and emotional. Consider the lyric of "So In Love" from the musical adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Taming of The Shrew*,

"Kiss Me Kate."

The opening lyric is poetic, thoughtful and dreamy at first,

*Strange dear, but true, dear  
When I'm close to you, dear  
The stars fill the sky  
So in love with you am I*

but then, and surprisingly so, in the last verse the lyric becomes immediately direct and even strident. It is interesting how he saves the intense emotion for the final verse where the intention is to heighten the drama. This last verse seems to have been created out of theatrical necessity. The form of the song with this final punctuation, lyrically and musically, really creates a powerful contrast.

*So taunt me and hurt me  
Deceive me, desert me  
I'm yours 'til I die  
So in love  
So in love  
So in love with you, my love, am I*

To exhibit real control over lyric content is to show sheer mastery in the art song form.

This is an example of Porter's extraordinary lyrical intelligence being used in artful service to music, thought and emotion.

The method or word painting techniques used, or "how" both elements, music and lyric, are integrated and support each other, is also worth a look.

What occurs when the listener finds himself in Porter's world, sometimes through a magical turn of phrase is something the singer will always consider when interpreting the lyric. In Porter's case, choice is everything. And musical thought and imagery always seem to line up and, being carefully combined, create a unique musical expression.

One brief example which illustrates this premise, is how the opening lyric of the song *Night and Day*, “Night And Day,” is sung in ,using musical -theoretical terms, the region of the dominant, *flat VI to V7*. And then when the music is resolved to the *tonic I* chord an answering phrase is sung, in affirmation, “You Are The One.” This delay on the dominant region and resolution to the tonic illustrates, with a extreme level of skill and artfulness, the basic compositional principle of tension and release.

To quote Wilder,” The story goes that when Porter played this song for Max Dreyfus of Harms Music, he received an unenthusiastic reaction due to the bass notes beneath the melody at its opening. The resulting dissonance convinced Dreyfus that it would prejudice the audience. These bass notes are daring and highly unusual, but if you look at the closing measures of the verse, (read intro), you can see how the c flat in the bass against the melody was inevitable.”

Another way of looking at the overall effect achieved through word painting, one could suggest that the lyric “Day” resolves twice- once from flat VI and once again on the dominant. Both can be considered brief harmonic stopping points, or temporary way stations. It is interesting and important to note both chords and words both occur in the dominant region. This is, to use an older term, word painting at its apex. A simple lyric set in a subtle and musically ingenious manner has become suggestive, provocative and romantic. Both have achieved that rare quality of becoming inseparable.

In closing I would like to defer to Alec Wilder's collection of essays: "Overall I find Rogers warmer, Arlen more hip, Gershwin more direct, Vernon Duke more touchable, Berlin more practical. But no one can deny that Porter added a certain theatrical elegance, as well as interest and sophistication, wit and musical complexity to the popular song form. And for this we are deeply indebted." And I might also add, so grateful!

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