

Popular Song as Moral Microcosm: Life Lessons from Jazz Standards

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I

In a recent paper devoted to my topic, music and morality, my fellow philosopher of music Peter Kivy makes a helpful tripartite distinction among ways in which music could be said to have moral force.¹ The first is by embodying and conveying moral insight; Kivy labels that *epistemic* moral force. The second is by having a positive moral effect on behavior; Kivy labels that *behavioral* moral force. And the third is by impacting positively on character so as to make someone a better human being; Kivy labels that *character-building* moral force.

Kivy is decidedly skeptical about the prospects of pure instrumental music, or what he calls ‘music alone’, to possess the first or second sort of moral force, and only slightly less so for its prospects to possess the third sort. But he rightly points out that that third sort of moral force – what might alternatively be described as music’s power to shape for the better, albeit in subtle ways, what kind of person one is – is largely, if not wholly, independent of the first two sorts, the epistemic and the behavioral, and might be manifest where they are absent.

Before returning to Kivy’s three sorts of moral force, however, I want to underline a fourth way in which music can be moral. This fourth way is through music’s having moral *quality*, whether or not it possesses, in consequence, moral *force*. What I mean by moral quality is a matter of the mind or spirit reflected in the music, and most particularly, in the nature of its expression, both *what* it expresses and *how* it expresses that. Moral quality in music is not a function simply of what emotions, attitudes, or states of mind are expressed, but of how they are expressed – with what fineness, subtlety, depth, honesty, originality and so on. Music can surely display moral quality whether it is optimistic – as for instance, the first movement of Dvorak’s ‘American’ Quartet – or pessimistic – as

¹ Peter Kivy, ‘Musical Morality’, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Vol. 62, No. 246 (2008): 397–412.

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for instance, the first movement of Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony. What matters is the nature of the mind or spirit that shows itself through such expression, and more generally, through its management of all aspects of the musical medium, expressive, formal, and aesthetic.

The fundamental criterion of musical moral quality, perhaps too crudely framed, is whether the mind or spirit displayed in the music is such as to elicit admiration and to induce emulation, or instead such as to elicit distaste and to induce avoidance. If the former, the music has positive moral quality; if the latter, the music has negative moral quality; if neither, then the music is simply morally neutral.

But why, one may ask, does such a property of music deserve the label of *moral* quality, and not simply *aesthetic* quality? Before answering let me re-label the property in question as *ethical*, rather than *moral*, quality, appealing to a broad sense of 'ethical' that is familiar to us from Aristotle and the Stoics, comprising all aspects of character relevant to living a good life, and not only those corresponding to the moral virtues narrowly understood. With that relabeling in place, I see no way to avoid replying, to the question of why the display of an admirable mind or spirit makes for ethical quality in music, that it is simply because some minds or spirits are ethically *superior* to others, in the sense that they are such as to conduce to living a good life or to living as one should. Music can thus have ethical value in the sense of presenting exemplars of admirable states of mind that are conducive to, perhaps even partly constitutive of, living well, even if no demonstrable effect on character is forthcoming. And ethical value of this sort, one may add, in general makes music that possesses it *artistically* more valuable as well, artistic value being a broader notion than aesthetic value, plausibly covering rewards afforded by a work that are not directly manifested in experience of it.

So music might, in principle, have ethical quality without that resulting in moral force of either the behavioral or the character-building sort. But in fact it is difficult to believe that repeated exposure to music that is ethically superior, in the sense I have indicated, should have as a rule *no* effect on character at all. And that is because of the plausibility of a contagion-cum-modeling picture of what is likely to result from such exposure. Just as spending time with certain sorts of friends invariably impacts on character, if perhaps in a transitory manner – this is what parents have in mind in classifying their children's pals as on the whole either 'good influences' or 'bad influences' – so does keeping company with certain

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music rather than other music.² It seems manifestly better, for one's psychological and spiritual well-being, to spend time with music of sincerity, subtlety, honesty, depth, and the like, than with music of pretension, shallowness or vulgarity.³

As noted earlier, Kivy does not entirely discount the notion that purely instrumental music might have moral force, at least of the character-building sort, but the possibility that he is willing to grant is slender indeed. Here is what he says:

One might argue that, at least in some sense or other, great music uplifts us; makes us, for the period of the listening experience, feel a kind of exaltation... And even though this experience has no lasting beneficial effect on our characters...it would not be wrong to say that during the experience, at least, we are better people...Thus absolute music shares with many other human activities the propensity to produce in human beings a kind of ecstasy that might seem appropriate to describe as character-enhancing, consciousness-raising, and, therefore, in some vague, attenuated sense, morally improving, *while it lasts*.⁴

I have a few comments on this. First, as regards the feeling of uplift or exaltation that Kivy acknowledges can be the result of listening absorbedly to certain music, music in which one seems to be in the presence of a great mind or spirit – surely this effect normally endures for some time *after* the listening experience, and does not cease as soon as listening ends. Second, it is necessary to insist, *pace* Kivy, that any ethical benefit of music, if it is to be deserving of that name, must involve an effect on character that *endures* to some extent – that is, which outlives the occasion itself. Music that is only 'morally improving' while one is listening to it is not, to my mind, really morally improving, but rather only music that provides a temporary if pleasant *illusion* of moral improvement. But third, the mechanism of music's possible character-building force strikes me as both less obscure and more robust than it does Kivy. I have already touched on this, in mentioning the likelihood of contagion and modeling effects, but I now elaborate further.

² I here echo the claim made by Wayne Booth on behalf of great literature in his well-known book *The Company We Keep* (University of California Press, 1988).

³ For further reflections in this vein, see my 'Evaluating Music', in *Contemplating Art* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 411–2.

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Though they are not sentient, musical works are somewhat like *persons*. They possess a character, exhibit something like behavior, unfold or develop over time, and display emotional and attitudinal qualities which we can access through being induced to imagine, as we listen to them, personae that embody those qualities.⁵ In short, musical works are person-like in psychological ways. If so, then it hardly seems implausible that music regularly frequented will have moral effects on one, just as will being in the company of, and spending time with, real persons. This may transpire through the mere contagion or rubbing off of mental dispositions; or through a conscious desire to model oneself, in thought and action, on impressive individuals in one's environment; or through a less conscious identification with and internalization of attractive personalities with which one has contact. Why should something similar not generally occur through exposure to a given range of minds and spirits in music?

Let me be more concrete. Judging from the mind or spirit that comes across from their respective musics, Haydn would, I think, be a good choice of companion on a desert island, Tchaikovsky rather less so. It would perhaps here be fair to specify a *particular* Tchaikovsky, say that of the Piano Trio or the Fourth Symphony; these do not correspond to individuals I would care to be marooned with. On the other hand, I would willingly share my desert island with the Tchaikovsky of the 'Souvenir de Florence' or the Third Symphony. And what goes for Haydn and Tchaikovsky as imagined desert island companions holds as well for the proportion of time one would be well advised, on ethical grounds, to allow Tchaikovsky's music, or at least certain stretches of it, to occupy one's ears as opposed to Haydn's music.

Mention of Haydn naturally raises the issue of the ethical value of *humorous* music, especially skillfully and wittily humorous music of the sort Haydn produced in abundance, and of the intimate connection between *humor* and *good humor*. It is surely significant that most *humorous* music is also *good-humored* music: that it is, on the one hand, funny or amusing, and on the other hand, mood-improving and spirits-lifting. This observation provides a basis, perhaps, for affirming the inherently positive ethical worth of humorous music, but its development will have to wait for another occasion.

⁵ See my 'Sound, Gesture, Space, and the Expression of Emotion in Music' and 'Musical Expressiveness as Hearability-as-Expression', in *Contemplating Art*, op. cit.

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Leaving music aside for the moment, let us remind ourselves briefly of ways in which the other arts, most notably those of literature, theatre, and cinema, can contribute to moral education. Novels, plays, and films can offer imaginative acquaintance with concrete moral situations, represented in specific ways and from particular perspectives, and embodying concrete moral perceptions of them, engagement with which can aid us to better understand ourselves and others, and so to better conduct our lives. Such artworks, it should be stressed, need not *prescribe* moral stances in order to facilitate our efforts to define ourselves and to appreciate the selves of others; they need only *present* morally relevant situations sensitively and believably, allowing us a valuable exercise of our moral faculties. Such artworks generally serve to enlarge our moral imaginations, making us more capable of adopting the points of view of others and of empathizing with them. Even if an increased awareness of the subjectivity of others does not itself constitute moral improvement, it is clearly a prerequisite to it, in that without such awareness we are less able to take the interests of others into account and so to treat them as ends rather than means.

The foregoing should all be roughly familiar as a defense of the moral relevance of arts such as literature, theatre, and film. But as the ancient Greeks were keen to emphasize, music arguably also has a place in moral education, the production and reception of some music serving to make us more fully human, despite representing no concrete individuals, scenarios, or situations. And that is largely because of the person-like character of music, remarked on before, whereby music can embody personal qualities, and thus affect one in somewhat the same way that persons do. Music, through its form and expression, audibly manifests attitudes, emotions, and other states of mind, and these states of mind, to which we are exposed when attending to music, can clearly be of greater or lesser moral worth. Thus on the one hand there is music that exudes maturity, strength, courage, resignation, vitality, and determination; on the other hand there is music that exudes immaturity, cowardice, fecklessness, megalomania, hypocrisy, and superficiality. Some music reflects a process of thought that compels admiration and uplifts us; other music reflects a process of thought that inspires dismay and depresses us. Can it make no difference in what sort of musical atmosphere, ethically speaking, one chooses regularly to bask?

So much for the ethical dimension of instrumental music. I turn now to the main subject of this paper, the ethical import of song, and the role in such import of both the articulate component (the words) and the purely musical component (the notes).

II

As regards song, or texted music generally, claims of moral insight, which correspond to the first sort of moral force recognized by Kivy, and claims of character-building potential, which correspond to the third sort of moral force recognized by Kivy, are generally held to be less extravagant, and to have a more solid basis, than comparable claims for textless music. And the same goes for claims of what I characterized above as ethical *quality*, as distinct from moral force in any of Kivy's senses.

Still, the contribution of the musical element *per se* to whatever moral force or ethical quality a song ends up possessing surely remains crucial, and presents an enduring puzzle. Put bluntly, how is it that music can reinforce, amplify, or almost create single-handedly, the moral force or ethical quality of a text that would otherwise not seem particularly notable in that respect? I address that question towards the end of this essay, after having looked at an array of specific examples.

One of my purposes in examining a number of songs from the jazz standard repertoire – which to a large extent overlaps with what is called the Great American Songbook – is to underline that the ethical dimension of art is not something that is only of issue in regard to unconventional performance art, transgressive theatre, propaganda films in the mode of Leni Riefenstahl, homoerotic photographs in the mode of Robert Mapplethorpe, or intentionally provocative novels in the mode of Michel Houellebecq. That is to say, of art that, whether self-consciously or not, is in forthright opposition to prevailing mores. The ethical is, I suggest, a dimension in one way or another present in virtually all art, even the declaredly amoral literary art of an Oscar Wilde or Vladimir Nabokov, the purely abstract visual art of a Piet Mondrian or Mark Rothko, and the abstruse musical art of a Pierre Boulez or Milton Babbitt.⁶

I begin by contrasting the Rube Bloom song 'Day In, Day Out' with two somewhat similar songs, 'You Go to My Head' and

⁶ Nor do I mean to suggest that ethical quality is the exclusive prerogative of songs in the repertoire from which I draw my examples. Many songs from the rock, folk, and blues genres also exhibit such quality. Consider Leonard Cohen's 'Everybody Knows', whose poetic cynicism, smooth transitions from global to personal concerns, jewel-like mandolin accompaniment, and rich background vocals all contribute to its ethical impact.

'Night and Day'. These three songs all have more or less the same theme, namely, the unparalleled effect of the beloved on the one who loves, and how the sway of the beloved over the lover amounts to a kind of possession, calling possibly for eventual exorcism. And all three songs exhibit, of course, a measure of ethical quality in virtue of their musical excellence and taste and the mind that such excellence and taste manifests. 'Night and Day' and 'You Go to My Head' are as fine, or perhaps even finer, from the musical and lyrical point of view, as 'Day In, Day Out'.⁷ But I suggest that they embody less, if anything, in the way of moral insight, and that their ethical quality is thus less than that of 'Day In, Day Out'.

'Day In, Day Out' offers, first of all, a picture of amorous absorption even more revealing than that offered by the other two, turning on the figure of the beloved as a recurring tattoo, coursing through one's blood and permeating one's being, and the idea that the presence, the sight, the touch of the loved one utterly transforms the world, whatever the weather may happen to be.⁸ But what probably most distinguishes 'Day In, Day Out' from the other two songs is its quasi-narrative aspect, which makes the phenomenology of love it conveys even more vivid and affecting. This is most noticeable in the bridge, which sketches a paradigm scenario in the lover's daily existence: 'Day out, day in, I needn't tell you how my days begin. When I awake I awaken with a tingle, one possibility in view, that possibility of maybe seeing you.' And the narrative momentum of the bridge is continued in the chorus that follows, 'Come rain, come shine, I meet you and to me the day is fine, then I kiss your lips, and the pounding becomes, the ocean's roar, a thousand drums', leading sweepingly to the emotional climax and vocal high point of the song, 'Can't you see it's love, can there be any doubt'.

With 'Day In, Day Out' one doesn't just *grasp* the nature of the lover's possession by the beloved through a series of original and poetically arresting images of intoxication, as in 'You Got to My Head', or through a sequence of alternately besotted and bemoaning apostrophes to the beloved, as in 'Night and Day'. One rather *lives* that possession itself, albeit vicariously, in virtue of the narrative, albeit fragmentary, that the song contains. And it is most of all in that

⁷ To note just one respect in which the music of 'You Go to My Head' is not only beguiling on its own terms, but incredibly well-fitted to the sentiment of its lyric, the octave leaps at the beginning of the vocal line at each of three stanzas of the chorus are a perfect sonic emblem of the intoxicating effect of which the lyric so eloquently speaks.

⁸ Another song that foregrounds that idea is Gershwin's 'A Foggy Day'.

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illuminating vicarious experience that the surplus ethical quality of 'Day In, Day Out' resides.⁹

It should not, of course, be surprising that a narrative dimension, even if it is not essential to a song's having ethical import, can nevertheless contribute to its having such import. For a song is then able to draw, although to a limited degree, on the same resources possessed by novels and plays for evoking complex emotional responses to concrete situations and facilitating ethical insight into them.

Consider next the song 'As Long As I Live'. One thing that makes this song special is its uncommonly bluesy feel, of which Harold Arlen was, among the great American song composers, the past master. But another thing, and one more germane to our theme, is the genius of the lyricist, Ted Koehler, in following the line 'Maybe I can't live to love you as long as I want to' with the seemingly throwaway explanatory remark 'life isn't long enough'. For that is an unexpected and beautifully colloquial way of telegraphing how love, in effect, always aspires to forever, knowing all along that it is bound to finitude and must necessarily come to an end. The repeated amorous pledges of the speaker to love for all time are all the more poignant because they invariably raise in our minds the question of whether loving someone is something that one can reasonably *promise* to do. More likely, it is only something that one can promise to *try* to do, or that one can earnestly *hope* to do, for only as long as one lives.

III

Let us now look at the other side of the coin, turning our attention to songs that deal not with the thrill and exhilaration of love, but with the ache and desperation of its loss or absence. Pride of place here must go to Don Raye and Gene De Paul's 'You Don't Know What Love Is'. Probably no song conveys better the pain of loving

⁹ Alec Wilder, an authority on American popular song, offered this encomium of 'Day In, Day Out', one that responds to its special quality from a somewhat different, yet entirely compatible, angle: 'I was astounded by both the melody and the lyric...It was unlike any song in the pop field I'd ever seen...fifty-six measures long. The melodic line soared and moved across the page like a lovely brush stroke. It never knotted itself up in cleverness or pretentiousness. And it had, remarkable for any pop song, passion.' (Quoted in Philip Furia, *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 122.)

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hopelessly, long after love has flown.¹⁰ First, the despairing and soul-sick lyric is perfectly matched by, and fitted to, music of precisely the same character. But second, the idea that fully appreciating the value of love requires losing it or going without it for some time is one that rings completely true, at least to this listener. Naturally one might easily *understand* that truth in the abstract – say, in the manner in which Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych, before his fatal accident, had always grasped the syllogism 'All men are mortal; Caius is a man; Hence Caius is mortal', not seeing that it had any particular relevance to him – but a song like 'You Don't Know What Love Is' makes you *feel* its truth, in the most concrete fashion. And therein lies its not inconsiderable ethical value.

In a less wrenching, though perhaps no less moving, vein is the Rodgers and Hart standard 'It Never Entered My Mind'. This song, imbued with wistful regret and rueful musing, brings home as few others do how fragile love is, how often underappreciated, how often taken for granted, its inevitable departure from some oppressive notion of perfection being allowed to get in the way of estimating it at its proper value. The sublime rightness of the bittersweet images of life after love – such as ordering orange juice for one, being uneasy in one's easy chair, wishing that the other might get into one's hair again – have rarely, if ever, been equaled in the annals of song. The song's jilted lover seems, as one commentator puts it, 'almost bemused by her own heartache and understatedly characterizes it as mild discomfort.' But we see and hear through that, and have no trouble suffering along with her empathically.

Consider now another love song – it hardly needs mentioning that love is the overriding subject of the songs in this repertoire, accounting for perhaps ninety percent of them – but one that stresses neither the joy nor the sorrow of love, but instead the mystery that so often triggers and sustains it, namely, the perception of the other as beautiful. 'You Are Too Beautiful', another gem we owe to the team of Rodgers and Hart, straightforwardly conveys in its text the irrational power of human beauty, its dominion over the will, and its capacity to short-circuit, or even wholly disarm, moral assessment. The text is perfectly seconded, and its truth effectively illustrated, by the song's utterly beautiful, wholly unfussy, melody, one that is almost entirely diatonic, not needing any chromaticism for chromaticism's

¹⁰ A strong second-place showing, however, must be accorded at least three other songs from this repertoire, 'Angel Eyes', 'Estate', and 'When Your Lover Has Gone'.

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sake in order to lend it interest. There is ethical quality here as well, and not all of it resides in the luminous beauty and simplicity of the music itself; some of it resides in the wisdom of the sentiment conveyed by the words.

A more complex song, 'Sophisticated Lady', is full of sympathy for the woman of the title, though a sympathy qualified by criticism of the choices she has made, which the song regards as reflecting a basically evasive adaptation to the reality of disappointed love. The music of this standard is as sophisticated as the lady it helps to portray, and perhaps in a way that is similarly a bit forced, the bridge being almost unsingable in its unbridled chromaticism and unusual harmonic relation to the chorus that precedes it.¹¹

Its ethical dimension aside, 'Sophisticated Lady' is a particularly interesting song from one point of view: it is an example of a strikingly successful joint creation¹², the conjunction of an original instrumental by Duke Ellington and lyrics added subsequently by Mitchell Parish, where the composer and lyricist harbored rather different conceptions of the subject, that is, the sophisticated lady, in fashioning their respective contributions. Parish's sophisticated lady, as is evident from the song, is a blasé and jaded creature of the night, vainly attempting to escape the emptiness in her soul; but the sophisticated ladies that Ellington had in mind were the proper, well-dressed, middle-class, cultivated African-American schoolteachers of his Washington youth.

IV

For the sake of contrast I now draw attention to a standard that seems to me not just of *lesser* ethical value than those I have been discussing, but possibly of slight ethical *disvalue*. For if songs can have positive ethical value on the grounds I have been sketching, then presumably they can have negative ethical value, or ethical disvalue, as well. At the

¹¹ The main key of the song is Ab major, while the bridge is in G major, only a half-tone down but harmonically quite remote from Ab. What is especially hard to negotiate for a singer is the transition from the last note of the main section to the first note of the bridge, separated by the bedeviling interval of a tritone.

¹² I note here the rather unsympathetic, and in my opinion obtuse, view of this song taken by Philip Furia. (See *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley*, op. cit., 257–8.)

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least the song is of dubious ethical quality, even though it is, as regards both its lyrics and its music, of a high order.

The standard in question is called 'Everything Happens to Me', and represents, in a vein of apparent endorsement, an attitude of mind that is arguably not worthy of admiration, emulation, or sympathy, an attitude one might describe as one of self-indulgence and self-pity. The attitude represented comes through clearly in the opening stanza: 'I make a date for golf, and you can bet your life it rains. I try to give a party, and the guy upstairs complains. I guess I'll go thru life, just catching colds and missing trains. Everything happens to me'. The second stanza of the song delivers more of the same.

Plainly, one would do well not to dwell in the company of a persona as self-absorbed as that which such sentiments reflect, someone who feels that the ordinary small annoyances and inconveniences of life have somehow singled him out for special and unfair treatment. One wants to take this whiner by his lapels and ask, what will you do if you ever confront a real problem or experience a serious setback? To be fair, the closing stanza of 'Everything Happens to Me', which reflects bemoaning more worthy of sympathetic response, turning as it does on misfortune in love, somewhat offsets the initial impression of outsized self-pity.¹³ And both the song's harmonically surprising bridge and some nice chromatic touches in the song's main melody add an undeniable poignancy to the protagonist's complaint. Nonetheless, in the final analysis the song leaves something to be desired, ethically speaking.

This prompts me to a more general reflection concerning songs of equivocal ethical quality, such as 'Everything Happens to Me'. The crucial issue is whether a song not only *expresses* or *portrays* undesirable character traits, but in addition, does so in a way that amounts to *endorsing* or *condoning* them. Only if the latter is true will they clearly count as bad company for a listener on ethical grounds. And a song might conceivably also be ethically bad company if the implied author, while not endorsing or condoning the undesirable traits

¹³ 'I've telegraphed and phoned, and sent an air mail special too. Your answer was goodbye, and there was even postage due. I fell in love just once, and then it had to be with you. Everything happens to me.' Furthermore, when sung a certain way 'Everything Happens to Me' can be redeemed in performance, if the singer manages to neutralize what's unappealing about its persona by inhabiting it in a wistful yet knowing manner. The performance by Chet Baker comes closest, of those I have heard, to achieving that.

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displayed, fails to clearly *reject* or *distance* himself from the undesirable traits or obnoxious attitudes expressed or portrayed.

Still, mightn't the displayed character of the imagined speaker of the song be bad company *even if* the implied author is critical of the song's imagined speaker? Perhaps. That is to say, the mind of the song's persona might be a bad thing to spend too much time exposing oneself to, even if the implied author is blameless because implicitly criticizing or distancing himself from the persona depicted. Yet clearly, it is worse if the implied author appears to view the persona in a sympathetic or even just neutral light.

V

If any of the songs I have chosen for examination manages to achieve the ethical quality I am claiming for them, then surely the song 'What's New?' does so. Like 'Sophisticated Lady', 'What's New?' is one of those vocal standards that began life as an instrumental and then achieved a new identity once words had been attached to it by someone other than the composer. With the text in place, 'What's New?' emerges as a musical dramatic monologue, one half of a conversation between ex-lovers, the other half of which is only implied, yet readily imagined.

Note first that 'What's New?' achieves a satisfying unity between its opening and its closing couplet: the phrase 'you haven't changed' in the former becomes 'I haven't changed' in the latter. This is a small change, grammatically speaking, but one that adds to the song's very special poignancy: the first phrase is a remark directed to outer appearance in a vein of polite compliment; the second phrase is a naked confession of inner sorrow. And the falsely cheery 'adieu' – preferably pronounced a *l'americaine* as 'adyoo' – at the end of the bridge serves as a perfect hinge to the heart-break of the final chorus, with its almost unuttered 'I still love you so'.

'What's New?' achieves a truly impressive depth of characterization in such a short space. We are led to both admire and empathize with the protagonist's quiet suffering, with the brave face he assumes in the situation. A song like this fosters understanding of the risks and rewards of romantic engagement, and helps one to feel from the inside what it is like to harbor love for someone who has long ago ceased to care. Sensitive audition of 'What's New?', it may not be too much to claim, plausibly puts one in a better position to understand situations of this sort, to assess them morally if called for, perhaps even to deal with them better if one finds oneself in them.

VI

I here offer a few illustrations of how these exceptional songs, when treated in a jazz context, can make, ethically speaking, a greater or a lesser impact. I am thinking of ways in which specific interpretive choices made in performance by the singer of a song can serve to enhance, whereas others can serve to blunt, its inherent ethical quality.

Regarding 'What's New?', suppose that instead of a smooth descent on the words that follow the repeated refrains of 'what's new?' the singer offers instead a halting one, almost stopping on each word, something like this, 'how'..'did'..'that'..'romance'..'come'..'through'. If not overdone this can underline the vulnerability of the song's protagonist and his or her effort of keeping pain in check – trying, though not really managing, to affect an insouciance not felt – making that persona all the easier to empathize with, and making the song all the more effective on the ethical plane.

Regarding 'It Never Entered My Mind', both the song's tone of melancholy regret and its poignant portrait of one who wised up too late are arguably best served by a slow tempo and a legato vocal delivery, one that helps to conjure up an atmosphere of wistful reminiscence. A too lively tempo, a too blithe or jaunty vocal delivery, can undermine the effectiveness of this song, and its ethical value in particular.

Regarding 'Day In, Day Out', by contrast, adopting a slow, hardly swinging, tempo can make for an outing that is musically interesting, and can succeed in conveying a nice sense of relaxation. But such an approach also makes it difficult to convey the feeling of amorous exhilaration that is, to my mind, at the heart of the song and an important source of its ethical quality. Thus such an approach is probably not an optimal choice for bringing out what is best and most distinctive in that song.

VII

It is high time to venture some general reflections, difficult as they are to arrive at, on the ethical power of popular song. The crucial question, it seems, is this: How can setting to music fairly ordinary sentiments and observations – such as the ones we have encountered in this repertoire – make those sentiments and observations so much more affecting or compelling, and hence manage to invest them with what I have called ethical, or life-enhancing, quality? Is it a mere additive effect? Is it a kind of delusion? Are we being duped?

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We can formulate a couple of rather difficult conundrums here. The first is this: Is it simply that due to our pleasure in the music as such we end up attributing more validity to the sentiments or observations conveyed by the words than we would otherwise do? Or is it rather that setting the words to music in a particular fashion somehow provides a kind of corroboration of the sentiments or observations conveyed by the words? And the second is this: When a song moves us or touches us, and also conveys a substantial thought or distinctive perspective, does the thought or perspective seem more true or apt in part because the song has moved or touched us, or does the song move or touch us in part because the thought or perspective, musically enrobed, seems more true or apt? These are conundrums I am not sure how to resolve, but I push on in the hope of shedding some light on them.

Recall that of the four sorts of moral relevance that music might have that were canvassed at the beginning of my talk, three seem to remain live possibilities for the songs we have surveyed, namely *epistemic moral force*, *character-building moral force*, and *ethical quality*. To take the first of these, if a song manages to have epistemic moral force – that is, a capacity to embody and communicate moral insight – it seems that that will depend almost entirely on the words, words capable of conveying an articulate content. Since I want to focus on the specifically musical contribution to a song's moral import, I will accordingly here leave the issue of epistemic moral force to the side.

As regards *ethical quality*, however, and the *character-building* moral force that may be consequent on that, at least two things are clear. The first thing is that the ethical quality of the *purely musical component* of the song will contribute, all things being equal, to the ethical quality of the song as a whole, something it is thus better, for the good of one's soul, to spend time with. For instance, that the music of 'Sophisticated Lady' reflects a finer, nobler, more searching mind than the music of, say, 'Cherokee' – a sturdy old standard that yet served as a basis of improvisation for many great jazzmen – is at least part of why 'Sophisticated Lady' has a higher ethical, and not only aesthetic, value than 'Cherokee', and hence a higher artistic value as well. And the second, and most patent, thing is surely that the *particular manner of joining words to music* in these songs also accounts in part for whatever ethical quality the songs end up having, though in ways it is exceedingly hard to generalize about.

One clue to the special ethical quality that songs in this repertoire can have may be the element of exceptional *condensation*, *concision* or

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compression they exhibit. In experiencing a great jazz standard well delivered, one has a sense of getting to the heart of a subject, of being presented with its essence, because of the brevity of the medium and the consequent intensity of focus, where all must be said and sounded in no more than three or four minutes, as opposed to the hours involved in the unfolding of, say, a novel, film or opera. In a great jazz standard every note, every word seems to count, and the economy of means seems somehow to underline the justness or rightness of what is being expressed.

Of course, as has often been noted, condensation, concision and compression are also part of the power of *poetry*, a good poem often capturing in a small span of words a whole world of thought or feeling. Still, in song there is something additional: not just condensation, concision and compression, but the conjunction of two *quite different* vehicles of significance or orders of meaning-making – articulate words and inarticulate sounds – which in their interpenetration often manage to convey a single content, and to do so more powerfully than either is able to do on its own.¹⁴

A great song, one that is not only beguiling in its music and worldly wise in its words, but compelling in its precise marriage of the two, has ethical quality, one might suggest, partly in virtue of serving as an emblem of harmonious and mutually enriching cooperation, a prime goal of interpersonal relations and of social life more generally. And when one responds positively to such a song – acknowledging on an emotional level its utter rightness and fineness of tone – one participates imaginatively in the ideal of sublime interaction that the song represents.

There is also, finally, an undeniable aspect of *liberation* involved in the joining of articulate thoughts or sentiments to music. For it is a curious fact that one allows oneself to sing, or to hear sung, or to compose as a song, what one would be too inhibited or too embarrassed to simply speak, or hear spoken, or offer as a poem. Why? Well, it seems as if music inaugurates a sort of charmed unreality, licensing the expression of feelings too direct or too unguarded to survive without musical protection. And such emotional license, if not overindulged in, may count as an ethical benefit of engaging with songs such as the ones I have examined.

¹⁴ Perhaps the special satisfaction derived from song is partly rooted in some systemic awareness of the two halves of one's brain being singularly united in the comprehension of what is hearing, on the assumption of the right hemisphere as the main locus of musical processing and the left hemisphere as the main locus of verbal processing.

Jerrold Levinson

One last remark. I know that my own life, at any rate, would be considerably poorer without the benefits that exposure to and involvement with the best songs in the jazz standard repertoire can afford, and poorer as much ethically as aesthetically. And I am sure, as well, that that is not just the case while I am actually listening to them.

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