

Probing Question: Which comes first, the words or the music?

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Many people know that "Scrambled Eggs" was the working title of the Beatles' "Yesterday," the most-recorded song in history. Paul McCartney dreamed the melody and harmony one night, woke up, turned on a tape recorder, and played it at the piano. He spent the next few weeks singing the tune for friends, trying to find out if it was truly original or something he'd heard somewhere. During this time he used a dummy lyric, then went back later and found the right words to suit the rhythms of the melody.

The Beatles have secured a place in history for their music, not their lyrics, so it's no surprise that McCartney wrote the tune first. But is this how it's usually done? Do the words ever come first? And what happens when they do?

Penn State professor emeritus Bruce Trinkley, who has written operas, cantatas and a choral symphony, usually sets existing words to his own music. He often works with lyricist/librettist Jason Charnesky, a lecturer in the Penn State Department of English.

"I've always felt that singers love singing tunes, and audiences like hearing things that they can remember," Trinkley said. "So all of the pieces that Jason and I have written have a very strong lyrical and melodic element, and Jason writes words that allow me to create that."

Trinkley's approach is typical for a composer who writes for the stage. "Most of the music I've written has been for ballet or theatre, and it's

typically been driven by a text or a dramatic situation," he said. "So often Jason will give me the lyrics and I'll set them, and the melody hopefully matches the mood -- considers what the words are saying and what the characters are doing."

Once given the words, Trinkley usually works alone. He often makes notes on the libretto about rhythms, which in combination with the meaning of the text, lead him to melodic and harmonic choices. After he's set the pieces, he'll play them for Charnesky and negotiate a few final details.

"Setting words so that they can be understood can be difficult," he noted. "Subtle inflections can change the meaning. I'm very fortunate that I spent so many years conducting music theatre and opera, because I got to see firsthand what worked on the stage, musically and dramatically -- to hear what sat easily in the voices and what was difficult. I gathered a sense of what can be sung and understood, what conveys emotion."

Trinkley also has set poems to music. His choral symphony "Mountain Laurels," commissioned for the centennial celebration of the borough of State College, used for its text almost exclusively existing poetry written by central Pennsylvania poets.

Originally conceived as a small suite for combined glee club and women's chorus, "Mountain Laurels" soon blossomed into something larger. "As I started looking at poems, I found some of (Penn State faculty member and poet) John Haag's that just cried out for children's chorus," Trinkley remembered.

"Theodore Roethke had lived here in the 1930s, and he had written a poem about what was happening in Europe at the time. I knew this subject wasn't suitable for a small student choir, but would require the State College Choral Society and the Nittany Valley Symphony. I also

found some things in Froth, the college humor magazine, that were perfect for barbershop quartet. So the poems themselves suggested the settings and the ensembles that were involved," he said.

"Sometimes I'd have a kind of gut reaction -- that this was a keeper, a poem that I wanted to set. And sometimes it would be so powerful that I'd go right to the piano and do a sketch. For example, one of the pieces was a Joe Grucci poem, 'Lovely October,' which I set for women's chorus. It was a beautiful line of poetry that was so well-written, so well constructed, that it gave me a melody right away. It was such a distillation of autumn that you could smell it."

Trinkley's creations begin with a text; other composers start with the music; and some do both. Richard Rodgers, while working with lyricist Lorenz Hart on "My Funny Valentine" and "Where or When," wrote the melodies first. When he later teamed with Oscar Hammerstein, Rodgers -- at his partner's request -- started with the lyrics.

Whichever comes first, Trinkley said, it's the combination of words and music that can make a song sublime. "What a pleasure when I have a chance to create a song for a character, to make it seem real! When I revise a piece, it's not that I want the words to change, but more that I want to reconsider my own response to them," he said.

"I love the quote about the sculptor who, when asked how he made such beautiful objects, responded that he simply removed everything from the raw material that wasn't the object itself. I always hope I'm getting to the perfect piece, so it all works within an inch of its life."

Source: Penn State (By Stacy Tibbetts, Research/Penn State)

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