

# Learning to Love Stephen Sondheim

Melissa Errico's 'Sondheim Sublime' will help even the most skeptical listener find the beauty in the songwriter's lyrically and harmonically complex numbers.

By *Terry Teachout* Nov. 28, 2018

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Stephen Sondheim is America's greatest living theatrical songwriter—but he's not popular, and never has been. Part of the problem is that his songs are too lyrically and harmonically complex to suit the tastes of the average listener, in addition to which they tend to lack a clear-cut emotional profile. The look-both-ways-before-crossing ambivalence of a lyric like "Sorry/Grateful" ("You're always wondering what might have been / Then she walks in") is worlds away from the wholehearted view of romantic love that has traditionally been the stuff of pop-music success.

Just as important, though, is the fact that Mr. Sondheim is and has always been a theatrical composer, not a creator of free-standing songs. His songs exist to drive the plots and deepen the characterizations of the shows for which they are written, so much so that their meanings are often not fully clear when they're performed outside the dramatic contexts of those shows. An oft-cited case in point is "Not While I'm Around." If you don't know "Sweeney Todd," it sounds like the purest and most straightforward of love songs—but it's sung by an innocent street urchin to a heartless criminal at whose uncaring hands he is unwittingly destined to die.

Taken together, these aspects of Mr. Sondheim's work go a long way toward explaining why so few recitals of his songs have been recorded by top-tier pop and jazz performers. Judy Collins's "A Love Letter to Stephen Sondheim," Jackie and Roy's "A Stephen Sondheim Collection," Cleo Laine's "Cleo Sings Sondheim" and "Mandy Patinkin Sings Sondheim" come to mind, but after that, the choices grow thin on the ground. That's why the release this month of Melissa Errico's "Sondheim Sublime" (Ghostlight) is big news to those, myself among them, for whom his work has long spoken with the force of revelation. Not to put too fine a point on it, "Sondheim Sublime" is the best all-Sondheim album ever recorded, a program of 15 songs in which radiantly warm singing and sensitive, intelligent interpretation are tightly and inseparably entwined. Even if you've never felt at ease with Mr. Sondheim's cool embrace of ambivalence, this album, accompanied with like sensitivity by Tedd Firth on piano, will show you what you've been missing.

A veteran musical-comedy performer who made an unforgettable impression earlier this season in the Irish Repertory Theatre's revival of "On a Clear Day You Can See Forever," Ms. Errico sings like an actor, illuminating every twist and turn in Mr. Sondheim's lyrics. Listen, for example, to the unobtrusive yet incomparably vivid way in which she puts a separate spin on each of the varied similes out of which "I Remember" is constructed: "I remember leaves, / Green as spearmint, / Crisp as paper. / I remember trees, / Bare as coat racks, / Spread like broken umbrellas." Yet to call her a "singing actor" is to miss the point, for her vocalism is as finished as her interpretations are thoughtful. You scarcely ever hear her kind of dead-center intonation and flawlessly controlled vibrato on Broadway—or anywhere else.



Ms. Errico's personal story, as it happens, is no less interesting in its own right. After appearing on Broadway in six increasingly prominent roles that brought her to the attention of New York's drama critics, she finally landed a plum: John Doyle cast her as Clara in his 2013 Classic Stage Company off-Broadway revival of Mr. Sondheim's "Passion," in which she gave a luminous performance that by all rights should have established her as a stage star. Then, without warning, she developed a vocal-chord hemorrhage that forced her to drop out of the show, after which she spent 106 days unable to sing or speak a word as she recovered from the microsurgery that ultimately saved her voice. Instead, she started a blog in which she chronicled with unsparing honesty her agonizingly slow return to vocal health, proving herself in the process to be as talented a writer as she is a singer.

Perhaps because "Passion" was the show that came so close to ending her stage career, I have a special liking for the performance of "Loving You" that is included on "Sondheim Sublime." Unusually for Mr. Sondheim, "Loving You" is at once simple and startlingly direct in its articulation of the pivotal place of love in the singer's life: "It gives me purpose, / Gives me voice, / To say to the world: / This is why I live. / You are why I live." Accordingly, Ms. Errico sings it with a tender, unadorned simplicity that conceals her supreme artfulness: All you hear is understated yet intense feeling. I realize that Mr. Sondheim's own art will never be for everyone—he asks too much of the listener—but each time I listen to "Sondheim Sublime," it's hard for me to see how anyone could resist his songs when they're sung like this.