

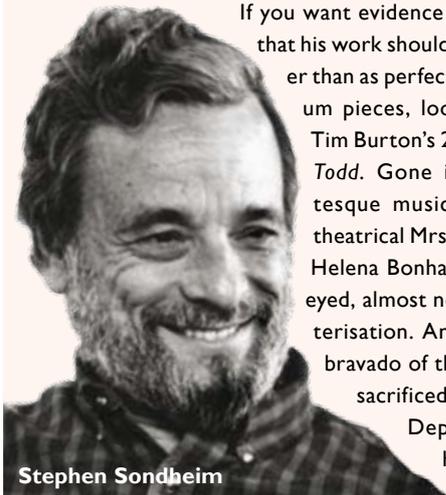
## Singing Sondheim

*The Singer* begins a brand-new series of symposium-style discussions about the performance of different singing genres. We begin with 'Singing Sondheim', where **Piers Ford** chairs a discussion with the world's top exponents of Sondheim, asking what particular aspects need to be considered when performing this composer's work

Stephen Sondheim's experiments with theme, form and metaphor have embraced so many different references that he can be held almost single-handedly responsible for the evolution of the traditional Broadway book musical into a far more mettlesome and complex beast.

That responsibility hasn't always been worn lightly. Sondheim polarises opinion, and the clichéd charge that he is 'too clever by half' will always be raised or implied by critics who dislike, perhaps even resent, the demands his words and music can place on the audience. But for every detractor there is a champion endlessly thrilled by the humanity and compassion at the core of his work and its capacity for reinvention by new generations of performer.

If you want evidence of a determination that his work should be seen anew rather than as perfectly preserved museum pieces, look no further than Tim Burton's 2007 film of *Sweeney Todd*. Gone is the broad, grotesque musical comedy of the theatrical Mrs Lovett, replaced by Helena Bonham Carter's hollow-eyed, almost neurasthenic characterisation. And the *grand guignol* bravado of the stage Sweeney is sacrificed in favour of Johnny Depp's damaged anti-hero, for whom the



Stephen Sondheim

songs seem to amalgamate in a rumbling leitmotiv.

These are not great singing performances, but Sondheim absolutely understands and endorses the changes demanded by the very different medium of film and 21st-century audiences who probably won't have seen a theatre production of the show. And while beautiful voices have done wonders with Sondheim's material over the years, vocal perfection has never been a prerequisite for interpreting his songs.

'It would be a rare younger person who would be able to convince me with a Stephen Sondheim song,' says Steve Ross with some percipience, 'because you have to have lived a bit, and it seems to me you have to have a knowledge of the jokes and be believable as a person who would say those words.'

There is no doubt that when his work resonates with a particular singer or actor, it is often the beginning of a profoundly enriching association for the artist. It goes beyond the nourishing combination of literate lyrics and absorbing melodies. And it is usually reciprocal.

When I interviewed Sondheim once, he said: 'Sometimes colleagues in performance are absolutely astonishing; there are implications that are engendered by the performer's way of reading a line or singing a song. All the best performers bring to their role something more, something different from what the author may have put on paper.'

The distinguished performers interviewed here exemplify that special affinity with some intriguing insights into their personal interaction with his work.

### What are the particular attractions of Sondheim's work for you, as a singer?

**Elaine Stritch:** Everything he says in his lyrics rings a bell with me. He knows what's right and what's wrong, what's fake and what's real. And like Shakespeare, every time you do good work, something new comes out of it. The quality of the material absolutely matters. I love his humour. It's real humour – *real*: they call that wit!

**Steve Ross:** There are so many different ways to do the songs. I can layer in different parts of my own feelings in a more varied way.

To me, his songs are endlessly fascinating little templates, so intelligently written, so encompassing. We're all multitasking in our minds all the time, but he is able to present all of those parts. Take 'Buddy's Blues' [*Follies*]: 'Go away I need you. Come to me I'll kill you.' It's thinking-man's singing.

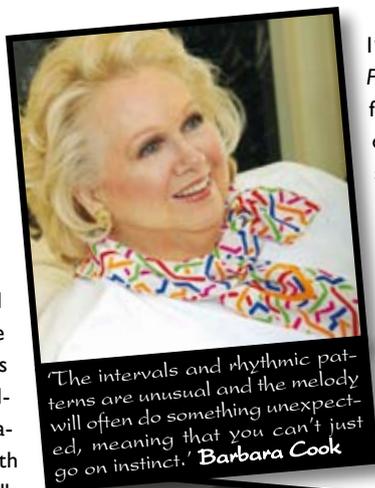
**Henry Goodman:** He's the performer's muse because he distils all the sources that are his own inspiration into dots and dashes. These must be experienced in order to be understood. In *Assassins*, the characters perform in the entertainment mode of their era and

personality. Charles Guiteau sings in the mode of the inspirational church hymn. As he climbs the steps to the gallows, the hesitations in the melody reveal him overcoming his fears. His insanity is revealed in superb dynamic control, in key changes and not just in the precise, witty verbal delusions. The musical detail is the delight and is the distress. Sondheim, by repeating an outer simple hymn-like melody, stopping it, and starting it, reflects Guiteau's inner state via the control of pitch and pause. Musically, the singer's personal experience is entrapped in the Sondheim stave. In *Follies*, he demonstrates the juxtaposition of Buddy's emotion and self-control with his joy by shaping music that ranges from vaudeville showgirl roots to realistic ruts in Manhattan relationships! Buddy sings 'Buddy's Blues' at the same time as he opens the *Follies* show. He's a clown and a lost soul. The patter of the cheesy welcoming number is set against Buddy's inner pain at losing his wife and his value in life. As with Guiteau high-stepping to his death, the audience can laugh and also learn by sharing his fight to stay bright in the face of terrible odds. This is Sondheim's other great gift to us: he is deeply compassionate to older folks as well as the young.

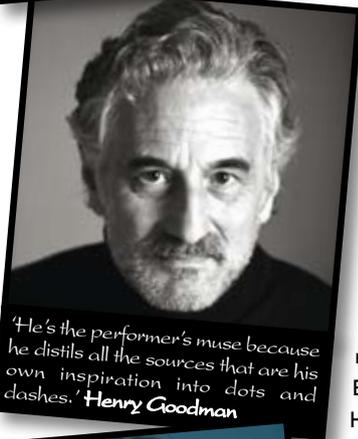
**Daniel Evans:** One of the criticisms I often hear is that you have to be interested in ideas to see Stephen's work. Maybe there's a grain of truth in that, but what I really admire about him is that he makes the appeal of those ideas emotional. So if you do get off on witty lyrics or musical ideas, or even just life ideas, they hit you in a very emotional way, not just a cerebral way. One of my moments of realisation was in *Merrily We Roll Along* with a very difficult patter song ('Franklin Shepard, Inc.') where Charley Kringas has a nervous breakdown. Stephen took me through it line by line. What hit me was that he'd put himself absolutely in that character's position. I realised that Stephen is, in one sense, an actor because for him it's not about creating pretty sounds or clever-clever lyrics. Everything springs from the situation, and the music and the lyrics are always appropriate to where that character's mind and thoughts and emotions are at that particular point. He writes musical thoughts rather than abstract motifs or pretty noises.

**Maria Friedman:** He has a finger on the pulse of how it is just to be alive in an ordinary world. And he understands the fallibility of human beings, and I think is very forgiving about them. He infuses everything with love – for a painting, a view, life – and the desperate need of a human being to love and be loved. Also, as an actor and a singer, both sides co-exist perfectly when you're doing one of his pieces because the demands on you are always truthful. If you can get to the core of it, you just have to serve it and it will do the rest for you. But that means quite often you've got to be thinking two or three things at once. Plus he's the most extraordinary lyricist, the rhymes are dazzling, so you'll be working on that at the same time, making sure that they ring and you don't miss the internal rhymes. Also, he makes me laugh – deep down belly laughs – as much as he makes me cry: what a gift.

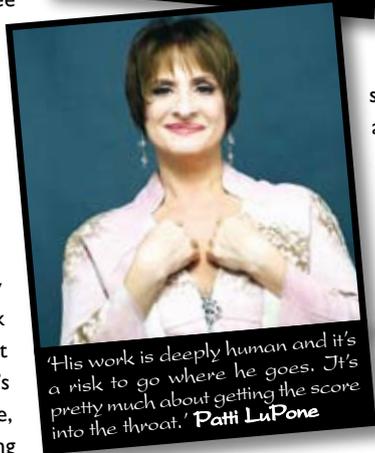
**Barbara Cook:** I'd known Stephen socially, through the 1950s and



'The intervals and rhythmic patterns are unusual and the melody will often do something unexpected, meaning that you can't just go on instinct.' **Barbara Cook**



'He's the performer's muse because he distils all the sources that are his own inspiration into dots and dashes.' **Henry Goodman**



'His work is deeply human and it's a risk to go where he goes. It's pretty much about getting the score into the throat.' **Patti LuPone**

1960s, but didn't actually do much of his work until *Follies*. I'd occasionally put a song in my act but I always felt that unless I did a whole Sondheim section, they didn't really abut against the others. I thought of them as 'art songs'. But when I did *Follies*, I fell deeply in love with his work, and a lot of that was to do with the quality of his lyrics, which are so universal and moving. They are witty and clever, of course, but most of all very emotional. They almost always say something that I want to say. Take 'No More' [*Into the Woods*], a song I've been doing a lot in the last year or so. It seems to have a lot more meaning with the world in this difficult state:

'Can't we just pursue our lives  
With our children and our wives?  
Till that happy day arrives,  
How do you ignore  
All the witches...'

**What are the technical challenges of singing his work?**

**Patti LuPone:** The complexity of the lyrics. There's never an exact repeat of a lyric, so memorisation can be very tricky. And you need to make sense of the line of the thought: I could never get 'More Hot Pies' [*Sweeney Todd*] correct! But it isn't just technical, it's emotionally complex. His work is deeply human and it's a risk to go where he goes. It's pretty much about getting the score into the throat. Stephen is specific about not swooping in under the note, which is one of my flaws and I think comes from a fear of not getting it. It's harder to sing it the way he wants it, but always better. It takes a lot of courage and vocal technique to approach it like that and trust that the note will be there. Stephen taught me that and I've continued to work on it over the years.

**Cleo Laine:** The complexity of his intervals doesn't fox me. Sondheim is aware of what performers can do, and he listens to people who can cope with what he's written. When I was in *Into the Woods*, I improvised a high note at the end of one of the Witch's songs and the musical director said, 'You can't do that!' I said, 'Why not? It's an improvement.' He said, 'But it isn't what Stephen wrote.' I replied, 'Well, I'm the one getting the applause and I think it's a better finish.' He recorded it and sent it to Sondheim, who must have approved as nothing more was heard. In fact, when he came to see the show, Stephen told me I was 'phenomenal' so I'd managed to please him. The Witch's rap was a bugger to do, though, because if you lost one word the whole lot came tumbling down.

**Stritch:** 'The Ladies Who Lunch' [*Company*] is one of the toughest three-act plays I've ever sung. It's difficult. I'm a stickler for the truth and I can't be satisfied unless I tell it that way and completely understand it myself. When I sing it, I'm sending up a certain class of dame, of which I have been a member in my time, although I hasten to add I don't Martini-lunch any more. The music and the lyrics are all one. That's why Steve Sondheim wants to do both. Because he can only express himself when he has the whole pile of wax. He needs it all, he has to express every area of a song, and I admire him for that. Even though he did write brilliant lyrics for *Gypsy* – and with all due respect to Jule Styne – I'm so curious as to what *Gypsy* would have been like if Sondheim had done it all.

**Evans:** With *Sunday*, there are parts of George that you feel are for a baritone voice but in the middle of 'Finishing the Hat' or the 'The Day Off', you have to go up into top falsetto. Those vocal gymnastics can be really tiring and I find some of his work very difficult to learn, lyrically and melodically because he never repeats exactly, he adapts and changes rhythms in the second verse. If your thoughts are in the right place, it gives you a clue about where he wants your voice to be. For example, George has a lot of low singing. But at the end of Act I there's a scene with his mother, who finally agrees to be painted. Sondheim places his voice around D, E and F and you wonder why he's suddenly talking up there. But I found that it made him seem like a little boy talking to mother. And once you key into things like that, it's already moving.

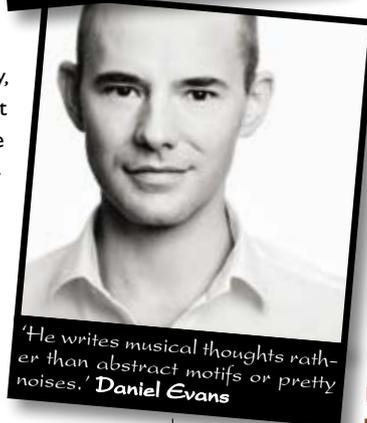
**Friedman:** For me the rhythms are sometimes more difficult. He's unbelievably rhythmically precise and it really matters to get that right, because there might be a minim or a crotchet that means something, and if it's longer, it's longer for a reason, not just because it sounds nice. It always links back to the lyrics and if you get it wrong and learn it wrong, it can be a bit difficult to unravel, because you might have taken an emotional turning that he doesn't agree with.

**Ball:** I'd recorded 'Losing My Mind' and I gave it a jazz-like feel. Then I was asked to sing it for *Hey, Mister Producer!* Steve said he didn't want me to do it like that. We went into a little room in Drury Lane with a pianist and work-shopped the song for a couple of hours. It's the greatest master class you could imagine. He made me understand why every note was where it was, where to breathe, what was being thought of, why he'd chosen this phrase.

**Cook:** Musically, it isn't easy. The intervals and rhythmic patterns are unusual and the melody will often do something unexpected, meaning that you can't just go on instinct. Normally, I've learned melodies quite easily but Stephen's songs always surprise you. Working on them brings the rewards, though: those difficult moments are often where the meat of the song is.

### How easy is it to reinterpret Sondheim's songs, and why do they often work so well beyond their original context?

**LuPone:** They are very dramatic pieces in their own right, so I



don't have to create another story to sing them out of context. You always want the piece to be universal if it's going to live and his work is really brilliant in that universal way: there's that whole concept of theatre, emotion, love. That's what makes something like 'Being Alive' [*Merrily We Roll Along*] or 'Loving You' [*Passion*] so perfect.

**Evans:** I think the songs' survival outside the musical is a by-product. I may be wrong but I don't think Stephen sits down and says, 'OK, I'm going to write a number one hit, "Send in the Clowns"!'. But when things are so specific – and not all of these songs will work outside the context – to that situation, they can also have a universal relevance. It just so happens that a lot of us have felt those feelings at different times, so the songs can be adapted and will stand alone.

**Ball:** They're universal but you have to do all of his stuff with sincerity. Take 'I'm Still Here' [*Follies*]: there is no better show business anthem to survival and it could easily be a parody of itself, but if you do it properly and land it, there is no better example of Broadway chutzpah. It's like 'Rose's Turn' [*Gypsy*]. You need a certain amount of restraint because it's there for you, you don't need to embellish.

**Friedman:** Most interpreters have to use their own life. As we get older, we've all had a bit of loss, hope, love, guilt. And he writes about people. The best songwriters allow the audience to feel that it's been written for them. When you're singing it, it belongs to you because it's your life you're observing and imagining. I really think that's what he does the very best. Just to be alive is complicated, so he's got a never-ending palette.

### How does his breadth of musical references resonate with you: is he more a global composer than simply American?

**Friedman:** Each show has all sorts of references, but it's always his, isn't it? Having played Mrs Lovett with Bryn Terfel, you've got two very different styles going on. I think in a film it would be very difficult. That 'out there' musical comedy with Mrs Lovett, which is absolutely essential in theatre, would have looked most odd in Tim Burton's *London* in the film of *Sweeney Todd*. I know that he was very happy with lots of that film and he's just very happy to see it reinvented.

### THE PANEL

**Michael Ball** played Giorgio in the 1996 London production of *Passion* and continues to include Sondheim's songs in his recording and concert repertoire. He has made a point of reinterpreting archetypal female numbers from a male perspective, most notably 'Losing My Mind' in the 1998 Cameron Macintosh celebration, *Hey, Mr Producer!*

**Barbara Cook** sang the role of Sally in the legendary 1985 Avery Fisher Hall concert performance of *Follies*. Her 2001 one-woman show ... *Sings Mostly Sondheim* was acclaimed in New York and London and with her seemingly ageless voice, she is now regarded as a peerless interpreter of his songs.

**Daniel Evans** won Olivier awards for his performances as Charley

Kringas in *Merrily We Roll Along* (2000) and Georges Seurat in *Sunday in the Park with George* (2005) – a part which also garnered him a Tony award nomination when the production transferred to Broadway.

**Maria Friedman's** long association with Sondheim began in 1990 when she played Dot/Marie in *Sunday in the Park with George*, and continued in 1996 with her Olivier award-winning performance as Fosca in *Passion*. In 2007 she was Mrs Lovett opposite Bryn Terfel in the Royal Festival Hall concert production of *Sweeney Todd*.

**Henry Goodman's** performance as Charles Guiteau in the 1993 Donmar Warehouse production of *Assassins* earned him an Oliver

**Cook:** Most of the time, he's just my friend Steve. Then I'll look across the dinner table and think, that's Stephen Sondheim! He's our Kern, our Gershwin. It's hard to think of him like that for me, but it's the truth. A lot of his music is so classically informed. I think of him as a European composer rather than particularly 'American'.

**Laine:** It depends what he's setting to music. You can't get more English than *Sweeney Todd* with that sense of old London. He's just got a very good ear, like Noël Coward, for whatever piece he's writing. And that's the important thing for any musician – to have the ear of the street.

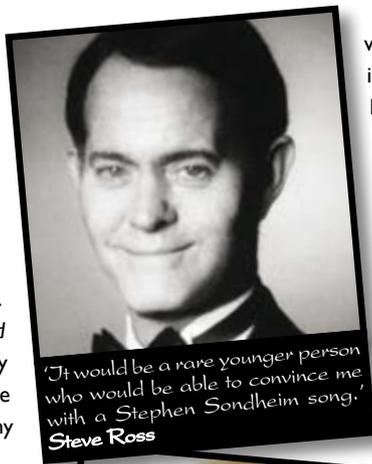
**Ross:** It's global, mature music. The references are poetic, imagistic. I haven't enjoyed every minute of every show I've seen. I can't get myself to see *Assassins*, for example, and I don't really like the songs that much. I also had trouble with *Passion*. So I'm not across the board, every word is gospel. Maybe what I have to do before I see these productions is listen to the music, get it all, because I won't get it the first time round.

### What impact does his personal involvement in productions have on you?

**Cook:** *Follies* is the only time I've worked with him on something of his own, although he's critiqued songs I've sung in concert and pointed out things that should go a particular way or where I've been singing a wrong note. But with 'Losing My Mind' there were two phrases that he wanted me to put together without a breath, and I just couldn't see it physically. Later, he told me that when I'd said that, he was surprised: 'I thought you just did it!' he said. 'I didn't know so much went into singing it.'

**LuPone:** Having him at rehearsals is historic. When we did *Sweeney* in concert, there was Stephen Sondheim, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra – one of the greatest in the world – and Jonathan Tunick correcting the score, and we were all just in awe. But nobody had a video camera to record it!

**Evans:** There is a kind of awe that he inspires. In my experience he is also very strict, never about notes necessarily, but about thoughts. So when you get to hear that stuff from the horse's mouth, it's such a thrill. And to have someone who's so ready to tell you is a real privilege. He also has great humility. Sometimes writers don't know



what they've written. Someone will come along and interpret their work in a different way. If Stephen hears something like that which he likes, he's very open. He's a collaborator. He knows that art can't stand still, more than most.

**Ball:** It's an extraordinary experience because it's like touching the roots of musical theatre. He doesn't disappoint. The lovely thing about rehearsing with him there is that he's absolutely fine about you exploring every place you can go. Then he'll say something that cuts right through the shit. And it is daunting. He'd be shocked to hear this, but you never feel 100% comfortable with him because he's so intelligent, intellectually superior to anybody I've ever met, and it's like sitting at the feet of the master. You want to please, to be stroked and told you're good. He'd be amazed to hear that because he doesn't regard himself like that at all. When I did *Passion*, there was no number for Giorgio that explained why he felt the way he did about Fosca. I felt that without that, the audience would find it too hard to understand. So Steve wrote the most brilliant soliloquy for Giorgio with money notes and everything. He totally understood why I felt it was needed. That's a really clever writer, somebody who can marry what he does with a performer's needs.

**Friedman:** The first time, I'd been made to sing a song in the wrong key by the director, because that was the key Stephen had written it in. I was struggling with some of the notes that were too low and he walked in and said, 'Why's she singing in that key? It should be this one.' He went straight to the piano and altered it. Other composers will tip you all over the place because they don't write properly for the voice; they want a huge key change that will take you up to an F when you've been banging away on a D. He might stretch you but he'll never push you beyond where you should be.

**Ross:** I am my own accompanist, and some of

the songs I do pretty much the way they're written, and with some of them we've tried other things. I was lucky that the great man himself showed up at the show last year, and he was OK with it. And I was very pleased about that. In the early 1980s when I did an album and put one of his songs on it, I got one of those little letters he's so famous for. He's a good guy, very curious and eager to help. ■

Award. He went on to play Buddy in the semi-staged production of *Follies* at the Royal Festival Hall in 2002.

**Cleo Laine** appeared as Desirée Armfeldt in Michigan Opera's production of *A Little Night Music* in 1983 and the Witch in the 1989 US national tour of *Into the Woods*. Her 1988 album *Cleo Sings Sondheim*, with orchestrations by the composer's regular collaborator Jonathan Tunick, is now considered a classic.

**Patti LuPone** has played Mrs Lovett in *Sweeney Todd* several times: in acclaimed 2000 New York and 2001 San Francisco concert performances, at Chicago's Ravinia Festival (where she has also performed several other Sondheim roles), and in John Doyle's 2005 Broadway

production. She is now back on Broadway, singing Sondheim's lyrics nightly as Mama Rose in a major revival of *Gypsy*.

**Steve Ross** is one of the biggest names on New York's sophisticated cabaret scene. He recently brought *Good Thing Going – The Songs of Stephen Sondheim* to London for a second time and will shortly release an album based on the show.

**Elaine Stritch** was Joanne in the original Broadway production of *Company* (1970), and retained the role in London when the show opened here in 1972. In 1985 she was an unforgettable Hattie in the Avery Fisher Hall *Follies*, and she continues to pay tribute to Sondheim in her award-winning show, ... *At Liberty*.