

Academic Writing and Publication: My Journey of Learning Through the Development of Articles from my Master's Thesis

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Abstract: In this essay, I discuss how I turned my master's thesis into three peer-reviewed publications and the lessons I learned about academic writing and publication in the process.

Long before I became a published scholar of musical theatre, I thought deeply about musicals. As a music major during college, I was infatuated by the work of Stephen Sondheim, and in graduate school, I wrote my master's thesis on his magnum opus, *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. Little did I know how many years this musical would follow me around, providing a foundation for my identity as a scholar. Although I had some practice at academic analysis in my two years of graduate school, the real thrust of my education about scholarly writing and publication would start in Fall 2011 when I decided to revisit my thesis and begin to think about publishing articles.

Literature in many fields examine the process of academic writing and publication (Furman, 2007; Hartley, 2008; Murray & Moore, 2006; Rocco & Hatcher, 2011), some of which focuses specifically on writing during graduate school (Aitchison, Kamler, & Lee, 2010; Collins, 2015; Mizzi, 2014). Graduate students might receive training in academic writing during their degree programs but may not think about how to publish (Aitchison, Kamler, & Lee, 2010; Rocco & Hatcher, 2011). Perhaps graduate students do not have the resources and are discouraged by the intense process. Indeed, producing academic manuscripts demands rigorous logic and thought, sustained attention and commitment, and most critically, imagination and creativity. Hearing how others have published can de-mystify this daunting process (Collins, 2015). In this essay, I discuss how I produced three refereed journal articles from my master's thesis over a 3 year period and the lessons I learned about academic writing and publication in the process.

Thesis Development

My thesis was concerned with how Sondheim constructed the score for *Sweeney Todd*. In all of the interviews Sondheim gave about the show, he mentioned two main points. First, he was inspired by the music of film composer Bernard Herrmann—in particular, a set of four pitches that Herrmann used in many of his film scores, especially *Vertigo* (1958) and *Psycho* (1960). The second comment Sondheim made about *Sweeney Todd* was that he was influenced, more generally, by a life-long fascination with cinema, which informed his artistic choices for the score. Thus, one of my thesis chapters was solely devoted to filmic elements of Sondheim's score, some of which were techniques borrowed directly from film scoring while others suggested film on a more metaphoric level. During my thesis research, Tim Burton's film version of *Sweeney Todd*—which had been in development for decades—was released. I saw the film and thought about how I might incorporate it into my existing study: considering how (a) Sondheim's lifelong fascination of cinema and how that interest shaped his musical, and (b) how *Sweeney Todd* ultimately transitioned to a film, provided fodder for thinking about the reciprocal relationships in terms of how a "filmic score" was adapted to film. Although I felt it

was a worthy pursuit, I decided I could not add another layer of complexity to my thesis and, instead, suggested this was where future investigation should start.

After graduating, I presented my first conference paper based on my third chapter at the *Music and the Moving Image Conference* held at New York University. Although I was interested in developing the conference paper into a manuscript, nothing became of it at that time. Three and half years later, I became restless, wanting to publish something out of my thesis. Because it had two explicit aims (i.e., to understand how film in general, and the music of Herrmann, in particular, shaped the score), I started by creating two separate documents and bisecting the thesis. The analysis of the score for the specific pitch class set 4-19 had been the most labor-intensive, and it was also the most obvious for a manuscript in terms of form, scope, and content. So, I started with that paper. Figure 1 summarizes the metamorphoses of the three papers: Paper I was accepted for publication with required changes. Then, I began paper II, at first rejected (IIa), so it was redeveloped (IIb). Paper IIb was also accepted for publication with required changes, but based on the feedback I received, I decided to split this paper into two articles (IIc and III). Paper III took about a third of the material from paper IIb, while paper IIc was re-developed based on the feedback.

Manuscript Development

Article I

To begin the process, I needed to work my thesis chapter 5 (how Sondheim had used this chord) into a manuscript form. Because it was also necessary to show Herrmann's influence, I also had to use a good portion of chapter 4. The first challenge was that chapters 4 and 5 had a collective word count of 9,000 words and 50 musical examples. The luxury of an academic document was a lack of space limitations whereas in academic publishing, it is a chief concern. A manuscript would need to be roughly half of that length and be tightened considerably. When deciding how to transfer the analysis to a manuscript, I needed to determine the most important occurrences of the chord, focus on them, and develop my analysis of each beyond what was required.

I submitted the manuscript to *Studies in Musical Theatre* in early February 2012 and received a conditional acceptance a month and a half later. In the letter of decision, the editors noted three main problems. The sheer number of musical examples caused the first two challenges: the concern for copyright and sheer space. The third issue was the reliance on *Psycho* to show Herrmann's influence on Sondheim. Rather than paying due diligence and digging into the score that really inspired Sondheim—*Hangover Square*—I had used the music for *Psycho* to show the connection because it was much easier to acquire. The reviewer rightfully held me responsible for showing the connection through an analysis of *Hangover Square* rather than *Psycho*. To acquire the music for the film, I did an extensive literature search and to my good fortune, one article (Whitesell, 2005) included several musical examples that I could analyze. I communicated with the author, who was quite helpful. Although I had purchased the film and watched it once, the reviewer's comment forced me to re-watch several times to understand and analyze how Herrmann utilized the music. Learning the material well allowed me to make connections between the film and its influence on *Sweeney Todd*. In the end, not only was my article stronger overall, but that the section on *Hangover Square* was probably the strongest section.

Articles IIa and IIb

With one manuscript in the publication cycle, I began to work on the second article. I was left with the cinematic aspects of the score, requiring me to revisit the film to note how it

was adapted. Although I had to bolster the argument that Sondheim was influenced by cinema, my real task was to make insightful observations about the adaptation itself. By the end of Summer 2012, I felt confident about my new draft and I submitted to *Music and the Moving Image*, the journal of the conference where I first presented the paper. Three months later, I received rejection notice with some suggested revision notes. Although the piece was described by a reviewer as “interesting and informative,” it “needed a stronger sense of concrete information and discussion of the ‘cinematic’ aspects incorporated by Sondheim.” Particularly challenging was the reviewer’s mention of the need about “Herrmann’s influence and the use of music in *Hangover Square*. The reader is left to try and imagine what the actual point of influence might have been.” Because I had covered this in the other paper, I was not sure how to address this (valid) claim that readers were left guessing the influence. Also noted was that “there is little discussion of classical film scoring or specialist writing on the subject...for an essay dealing with ‘film’ influences, there is very little reference to specialized writing about film, leaving most of the discussion on a ‘common sense’ level when dealing with ‘the cinematic’.” The reviewer noted that my discussions were rooted in the musical theatre literature rather than film studies and that the article was primarily “interested in Sondheim’s stage musical and spends little time discussing the film.” Because of this focus, the reviewer wondered if I had sent the piece to the appropriate journal:

This piece may well be suited for a journal concerned with stage musicals, but for one concerned with film and music, I would suggest that there is a more direct and more detailed engagement with the translations (film ideas to stage musical, stage to film musical), perhaps with a section of Burton’s film broken down to illustrate the processes in action. (Personal communication)

A reviewer also noted that rigor of my writing was not up to academic journal standards, that it read “journalistically” and required “a more analytical character.” Also noted was my reliance on secondary sources. S/he offered that a “more close analysis would have been valuable and perhaps less quotation.” This comment was not particularly surprising, as my article was built around the contributions of other scholars who had observations about the influence of film in Sondheim’s work. Accordingly, “it could have drawn far more in the way of conclusions from the discussions.” Although I felt a setback by this review, it was a significant turning point for me as a scholar. I learned that I could not rely on other people’s ideas (even if I properly cited them) and that a publishable scholarly essay required not only a talent for piecing together good ideas, but demanded rigorous thinking about the subject to make original contributions to the literature. Sondheim may have made his aims for *Sweeney Todd* explicit, but in extending his argument, the evidence needed to be provided by me, not as an amalgamation of the work of other scholars.

For the next three months, I worked diligently on reworking my manuscript. Instead of writing about a point because Scholar X did, I needed to *engage* with the material. I listened to Sondheim’s score while reading the music and I watched Burton’s film several times, taking notes about new observations. I read more related work from the literature. When I had done as much as I felt I could do, I presented the paper to two colleagues: a musicologist and a music theorist. In their feedback, both questioned some of the assumptions I had made, pointed to weaknesses in logic or in detail, and made suggestions of what to investigate. For instance, in trying to substantiate a claim Sondheim made about 80% of *Sweeney Todd* being accompanied by music, one suggested I make a table to show all of the orchestral cues. This was a way of presenting data and to substantiate the arguments I was making. He also suggested that I make

very specific arguments about the various cinematic aspects of the stage musical that were changed for the film version. The second colleague pointed out that I was going into very little depth about the new scoring for the film. Again, because film scores are difficult to get a hold of, I had taken the easy way out by describing, minimally, the effect of the new music composed for the film.

In addressing both of these colleagues' feedback in as much detail as possible, I ended up with a draft that covered a lot of ideas, but I felt good about the extensive work that I had done in re-working the version that had been rejected. The overhaul was so extreme that it looked like an entirely different paper. In January 2013, I sent the manuscript to *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*, which I had discovered after having submitted to *Music and the Moving Image*. The new draft was entitled "Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*: cinematic nature and film adaptation." To my delight, I received positive reviews and an acceptance with required changes in May 2013. Reviewer 2 described the essay as "a very welcome and fascinating article on a very important adaptation of the last few years. The range of context and criticism is convincing and its musicological analysis is at a very high level." In describing Burton's film as "the most ambitious and most 'straight' adaptation for film of a revered stage musical in a couple of decades," Reviewer 1 went against my argument, which was that it was a radical re-envisioning of the stage show. I was unprepared to read the next line: "It is not especially well-written, and the text contains malapropisms as well as clumsy expression, inadmissible [sic] grammar and typos." Although it stung, the reviewer's point was well-taken and corroborated by the other reviewer: "the article is a little conversational and informal at times and the piece should be overhauled to clarify its academic rigour and avoid any ambiguities." Despite my best efforts to make the article read as scholarly as I could make it, it still read as "journalistically" to these reviewers.

Beyond the general comments, however, I learned a great deal from the more detailed suggestions that followed. For example, the writing was not "sufficiently incisive. It spends most of its effort and length on discussing incidental music, misses a number of points" (Reviewer 1). Reviewer 2, who had less radical notes, wrote, "The piece is already long but it is strongly recommended that the author tightens some of the frames of reference." Specifically, the reviewer felt that I neglected to show the history of how the 1847 tale transitioned through the decades to Sondheim's musical. Reviewer 1 had some major suggestions. The first of which was the most dramatic:

For an article of 10,000 words, far too much emphasis is laid on incidental music. While tightening up some of the points and arguments about it, I would say that an article dealing with this topic needs to get further away from adulation of Sondheim (there are too many quotes from him and it is too close to his own protestations in viewpoint) and take on questions of genre. (Personal communication)

Two things about this comment struck me. First, I had not realized it before, but after this comment, I took another look at my draft and noticed that nearly a third of it was concerned with underscoring (the music played underneath the dialogue) and I was really just scratching the surface. Suggesting that I eliminate some of the discussion on underscoring, the reviewer thought I needed to focus on aspects of genre.

Second, despite trying to develop my own thoughts, I was still relying too much on Sondheim. In addition to the broad concerns, the reviewer noted that the title should be more incisive, writing,

If it's really about *Sondheim's* [emphasis original] *Sweeney Todd* then it shouldn't really be published in this journal. If it's also about Burton's, then we want to know: film adaptation of what? Musicals in general? An already cinematic musical? One man's masterpiece as another's? (Personal communication)

Thus, despite the extensive re-writes, the focus of the manuscript was still situated with Sondheim. Without sufficiently troubling the material, my analysis had not gone as far as it needed to go. Although it now contained more analytical rigor, the discussion could be enriched by thinking hard about when I wanted to include Sondheim, and when he was overpowering my discussions. With this in mind, Reviewer 2 asked if the ideas of the paper could be broaden the scope, but not extend the length of the article.

While mulling over these suggestions, I decided that I could not address everything requested in the word length of the piece. Further, it seemed to me that I had two arguments meandering through the draft. The first was to show cinematic thinking in how Sondheim developed his score and how those thoughts adapted to film in Burton's adaptation. The second was how Sondheim used techniques of film scoring to sustain tension and how that transitioned in the film. The two aims of my paper were not aligning. In essence, I went back to my original design of chapter three of my thesis: That some of the filmic characteristics of the score were actually borrowed from film scoring and others merely implied it. I concluded that there were two independent papers. One would focus on the adaptation (through the metaphoric cinematic features) and another would focus on Sondheim's extensive use of underscoring and both papers would be concerned with respective aspects of the film transformation. Once I had this realization, I saved a new draft (lest I was making a terrible mistake) and began bisecting again. At the beginning of Summer 2013, I had two half manuscripts, each of which needed to be developed in different ways.

Article III

I enrolled in a "Writing for Publication" graduate course as part of my doctoral program, the main requirement for which was to produce a manuscript to submit to a journal. The class afforded me an opportunity to develop my new manuscript (focused on underscoring). For those six weeks, I shelved the feedback I had just received on the 'adaptation' piece and focused solely on the underscoring in both stage and screen versions of *Sweeney Todd*. The new focus allowed me to zone in and make more complex arguments about what Sondheim had done with the underscoring. With the help of my peer group, at the end of the course, I had developed a manuscript ready to submit to a journal. The name of the new piece became: "It might have been sophisticated film music': The role of underscoring in stage and screen versions of *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*." Although I had some reservation about sending the article to a journal in which I had already published, it made sense to send the piece to *Studies in Musical Theatre*. About six months later, I received another positive email, inviting me to develop the manuscript for publication. The reviewer wrote,

The idea behind this article is extremely sound and the way it proposes to embrace the stage and film versions of *Sweeney Todd* is certainly noteworthy, original, and potentially revealing. The article, though, needs some recasting in terms of vocabulary, content, and structure. (Personal communication)

In detailing the issues with the essay, the reviewer pointed out that I was using distinct concepts and terms indiscriminately. Thus, I highlighted every use of each of these terms and scrutinized carefully how I was employing them.

Another issue with which I contended was the organization. Although the general structure of the piece (discussion of the stage musical first and the film, second) was suitable, the layout within needed attention. Reorganizing the paper presented some significant challenges, but the reviewer's point was valid: the discussion convoluted two different topics. So, I spent a few weeks working out the details of separating the discussion of the elements. Although I liked the reviewer's suggestion of min-parallel structures, I was unable to make these structures work in the film section due to the content I covered.

The second reviewer also had some points, but they were less dramatic and in being more of wish list types of items, would have taken significant word count to address. Thus, although I had to dismiss them, I qualified my response by saying that they were ideas worthy of pursuit—if I had had more space. In the Writing for Publication course, the instructors suggested that we create a matrix detailing the ways the feedback was addressed: the reviewers' comments go in the left column and directly next to it, indicate (a) how we addressed the feedback, or (b) the reasons why we could not (see Table 1). I was given a month and a half to complete the re-writes and even though I had hoped to have them completed two weeks prior to the expected date, I was running right up to the wire despite my best efforts. I learned in the course that is crucial to let editors know if you cannot make a deadline. The morning the edits were due, I emailed the editors to let them know that I would be sending a draft later that day, but I needed a few more hours for the final edits.

One interesting challenge I encountered during the final copy-editing stage was how to cite myself and when to avoid self-plagiarism. Most of the material from Article IIb split pretty clearly between IIc ('adaptation') and III ('underscoring'). However, one paragraph was relevant to both articles. One of the trickiest things I had to do for III was to rewrite the paragraph, completely paraphrasing and citing myself. However, it was complicated because both articles were in press at the same time. Thus, I had to consult with the editors of both journals to ensure that I was not self-plagiarizing. In the end, I decided the content originated in IIc and that III would cite IIc.

Article IIc

I was pleased to receive positive reviews and a conditional acceptance decision for article II, but at first I was not sure how to approach the requested changes. Unsure of how to proceed, I decided to write a detailed letter to the editor requesting some clarification and advice. After laying a general premise of my concerns, I specified a number of questions about clarification and plans of actions. My first point was that more emphasis should be placed on the adaptation and less emphasis should be placed on the underscoring. But I also recognized that the discussion of the underscoring was important to me, both in Sondheim's original score and the new music written for the film. I noted that the reviewer was correct about some of the problematic descriptors I was using because of their limitations. However, I argued, "thinking about the functions or the underscoring ...has merit." I had not fully come to terms with how I would handle this and so I offered, "If I can discuss underscoring, I am certainly willing to condense a bit." But condensing something so important and fundamental was not jiving. This cognitive dissonance led me to split the article, allowing for more space for each topic to be studied further. The rest of the points were either (a) questions about how to address the reviewer's comments, or (b) detailing a plan of action. After six bullet points, I concluded that I was

enthusied by the comments I received and am certainly willing to re-write sections and re-frame the overall argument. It seems to me that while both reviewer one and I agree that

the adaptation is successful, we believe so for different reasons. I am wondering if this difference of opinion and vision for the piece is prohibitive in moving forward. (Personal communication)

I also asked about the process and timeline for revision. I never heard back from this editor. I share this experience for a few reasons. Most fundamentally, although the letter to the editor was thoughtful and detailed and probably an important exercise in terms of coming to terms with my reactions, my questions and my plans to move forward, it shows a novice scholar who was unsure of his work and how to proceed through the publication process. Indeed, my professor for the Writing for Publication course indicated that this was probably a “rookie mistake.” Although processing these emotional and intellectual responses was critical to the process, it would have been wiser to find a trusted colleague who could help me think some of these things through. After all, these comments were from reviewers in a blind process; they were not from the editor himself.

After I made the decision to divide the piece into two based on the comments I received from article II, I focused on the adaptation aspects of the work. Taking a third of the content out of the article allowed me space to discuss how Sondheim adapted a 1973 version of the 19th century tale from British playwright Christopher Bond and to incorporate some theoretical framework from the field of adaptation studies, an entire field that I did not know existed prior to this project. Once I removed the underscoring material, it did not take me long to determine the structure of the new version. I had my work cut out for me and I worked steadily over the next month. I sent the reworked adaptation piece in late July 2013. When I still heard nothing after fourth months, I sent an email of inquiry. I heard nothing, so six weeks later I sent another inquiry and learned it would be published in the spring issue. Soon after, I received a request for minimal copy edits and before I knew it, the work was published.

Conclusion: My Lessons

The writing and publication process can be daunting for a novice scholar. However, so much can be gained from not only the process of writing, but also by the publication process that follows. Although it is impossible to describe everything I learned about the writing and publication process over the five years of developing manuscripts from my master’s thesis, below are the major lessons:

1. Writing is a process, a long process. Writing will not likely be publishable until it has been through several rounds of revisions and before many people’s eyes. Outlining the structure of the paper can be helpful in most cases, but sometimes it takes writing through your thoughts to figure out how to organize a paper.
2. It is critical to pay attention to specialist language: in order to be taken seriously as a scholar, you must be well-grounded in specialist jargon and know the literature and how concepts and terms are used in an academic discipline.
3. It is not a bad idea to contact experts in your field. They may be willing to help guide and mentor you.
4. You should learn to scrutinize your writing more deeply and to understand that every word has meaning; similarly, putting your work out to so many people may help you to develop thick skin for receiving feedback about your work.
5. You should do your research, investigate the mission and scope of the journal, read other articles from that journal, and make certain you are sending it to the proper venue.
6. You should not take short cuts: reviewers and editors will call you out on them.

7. Learning to develop patience when wanting to receive a decision or feedback is critical. It can take a few months to hear back from an editor with peer reviews. When you do receive a decision from editors, it is okay to write back, but be sure not to ask superfluous questions that undermine your authority as a scholar. It is especially important to let editors know if you cannot make a deadline.
8. Once you receive feedback, you have to determine which are essential and which are “wish list” revisions. After you have completed all the necessary revisions, you should create a matrix describing how you addressed critiques or why you decided not to.
9. Several books about the writing for publication process exist. Reading them can be invaluable to learning about the scholarly publication process.

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Figure 1. Manuscript development from thesis.

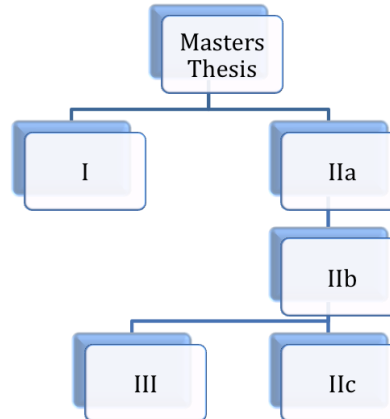


Table 1. Example of addressing feedback.

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|--|---|
| Page 21. In the second paragraph, more discussion of the musical underscoring, the topic of the essay, is needed. One brief mention is made, but for ten minutes of music, further commentary on the musical treatment would be greatly welcomed. | Discussion extended. |
| Page 21-22. Three lines from the end of page 21, is "inconspicuous" the best descriptor? Does the music react through its absence? Especially when "continuous music" is the norm, the cessation of music can be very dramatic. | This section has been re-written. |
| Page 22. Could the statement "The music of the film does nothing to salvage the horrors on the screen" be elaborated upon in more detail? It's a provocative thought and worthy of development. | I have elaborated and concluded the main body of the essay with this thought. |
| Page 22. Conclusion. Music serves characters other than Sweeney Todd, as you demonstrated with Mrs. Lovett's "Not While I'm Around." The sentence following the block quote denies this. The conclusion includes the first mention of secondary characters being excised from the story for the film version. It is distracting to introduce a new topic, especially one such as this, in the final sentences of an essay. | The conclusion has been reworked. |
| Page 23. In the works cited, please note that the Horowitz book is a second edition. | 2 nd edition noted |
| Page 25. Footnote 2. Please rephrase this, since several scholars are currently studying orchestration. Doyle's name needs the "l." | Rephrased to suggest that although it is now being studied, it was understudied in the years prior. |
| Page 26. Footnote 9. Non-functional harmony does exist in musical theater, especially in some newer shows. Could you add the qualifier "mainstream" to the final clause? | "Mainstream" qualifier added |