The Ballad of Sweeney Todd

Sondheim Characteristics

1. Brilliant Lyrics - Often unfairly judged as being better than his music. Often feature rhymes that “pile up” for a humorous effect. Uses alliteration to add punch and create a driven feeling in his lyrics. The images and ideas he creates through his word choices are very striking.

2. Dramatic Use of Music - Unusual use of changing metres, syncopated rhythms, melodic intervals that are “often difficult to sing, and complex and surprising harmonies all contribute to the creation of mood and evocation of the drama in the lyrics.” Dorricott & Allan.

3. Theatrical song composition – Sondheim wrote specifically for the theatre unlike Lloyd Webber who includes “commercial” songs in his musicals for universal appeal. “Sondheim has described his songs as “inner monologues” that reveal to the audience – but not to those on stage – what a character is feeling.” Dorricott & Allan.

4. Originality – Sondheim in all of his works tries to break some sort of new ground. i.e. the macabre plot of Sweeney Todd, using a ‘sung’ overture for A Little Night Music, the use of fairytales as the basis for his adult musical Into the Woods.

Ballad of Sweeney Todd Analysis

Section A –

- Tonality F sharp minor- represents the dark and mysterious nature of the song, haunting minor key.
- Low dark strings playing pianissimo restless continuous rhythms work against the low tonic F# pedal note to create unrest.
- Solo bass singer creates dissonance against the string accompaniment to create intrigue, tension and discomfort in the listener.

Section A 1

- Accompanying strings are now mezzo piano, growing in dynamics with the intensity of the song.
- Tenor voice now takes over in the narrating of the song and tale of Sweeney Todd.
- Eerie, very high countermelody is heard over the top of the voice and strings. This is to increase the tension, unrest and suspense of the piece.

Section B

- Full chorus section begins at fortissimo.
- The strong dotted crotchet beats of chorus singers creates a very accented and cutting feeling, much like the razor they are describing of Sweeney Todd’s.
- The use of parallel 4ths between the chorus parts creates a dissonant and tension increasing feel.
- The use of the parallel fourths and fifths in bar 71 creates an Organum medieval feel to signal the end of the chorus.
- The four part harmony is broken into three male voice parts and one line for the soprano and altos to sing together. The reason for this being this is a very male dominated piece about a cut throat barber intent on revenge. The forceful dark nature of the lower voices adds to the macabre impact of the piece.

Section A-2
- The soloist line is shared between a variety of voices- this increasing the community/ chorus feel of the piece and that the community is all aware of Sweeney’s intentions.
- It also ensures that the constant changing of voices keeps the listener unsettled and constantly having to re-evaluate as the voice type changes.

Section C
- Tonality – D Major – gives a false sense of security that the music has moved to a more pleasing major tonal centre.
- The vocals suggest a triple metre – intended by Sondheim to upset the flow of the music and to add to the bizarre-“ness” of the scene.
- Bar 118 – volume increases as the music works towards its climax.
- Texture becomes more polyphonic to increase the tension and drama.
- Dissonant chords (harmony) are used at Bar 128 and 129 to increase the emphasis on the word Swee-ney.
- Bar 130 the climax occurs with the high fortissimo tonic chord that is held for six bars. The high pitch and duration of the notes increase the dramatic tension and leave the listener wondering when it will be released.

Section A 3
- Sweeney Todd rises from the dead to sing fortissimo.
- He is echoed by the chorus to add to the impact and emphasis of his tale that is to come.
- Accents on all running lower string notes to increase emphasis.
- The dynamics then decrease from bar 151 through to bar 159 and the chorus decreases to pp.
- The last word “Todd” is displaced onto the weak beat- which is designed to unsettled the listener as they are expecting the song to finish on the strong beat. Also creating an unsettled feeling for what lies ahead in the musical.