

A Musical Analysis of the Transformations of  
The Baker and The Baker's Wife in  
Stephen Sondheim's Into the Woods

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### Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the conductor's score of Stephen Sondheim's two-act musical and explicate the personalities of the Baker and the Baker's Wife. Through harmonic progression, careful use of specific keys, instrumentation, and musical motif, the transformations of the music describes the parallel changes to the protagonists on stage, and can be used to find the overarching meaning of the couple in the context of the play. The analysis of Act I consists of an exposition of the characters, a compare and contrast of two similar numbers, and a final look into the synthesis of the respective styles of the Baker and his wife that define their relationship throughout the act. The breakdown of Act II is completed in separate analyses: the first of the fate of the Baker through partial harmonic degeneration, and the second of the death of the Baker's Wife due to the acceptance of a style that is not her own. When combined, the investigation attempts to form the perspective and intentions of Stephen Sondheim as he wrote the music. Specifically, an emphasis is placed on the importance of love and the consequences of its betrayal, as opposed to the traditional opinion regarding feminism and sexism in the play.

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In the two-act musical, Into the Woods, composer Stephen Sondheim significantly uses orchestration to develop the characters in addition to the more obvious dramatic devices, such as dialogue and plot. Although one can directly observe the transformation of several of the key players in Into the Woods, it is through an exhaustive analysis of the score where one can truly see how these dramatic transformations are embedded in the music. As primary examples, the Baker and the Baker's Wife are extremely complex characters that can only be fully represented with their respective music. Furthermore, through musical compare and contrast, the different personalities of the Baker and his wife can be explicated to explain their individual fates.

In Act I, the Baker and the Baker's Wife are introduced adjacent to one another. Although it is immediately evident that the connection between the two protagonists is quite important, the music of the Act I Opening presents a subtle conflict between them that contradicts any first impressions of love, unity, or dependence. The best example of such a first impression is the very nomenclature of 'Baker's Wife'. Its impression on the audience is that the Baker is more important; the same as if "Hansel and Gretel" had been instead titled "Hansel and Hansel's Sister". Henceforth springs the Baker's initial pride. The conflict created by this pride is paralleled by the musical tension and disorder that Sondheim creates as the Baker and his wife appear on the set. The unison entrance of "I wish..." is accompanied by the bassoon and the clarinet, creating a subtle difference in timbre that somewhat differentiates the two voices. As Part 1 of the Opening continues, the rhythmical entrances of each character alternate between unison and solo patches, emphasizing a slight disunity that is enhanced with simultaneous chord alternation. For example, the Baker and his wife sing independently whenever the Bmi7 chord is being emphasized; a switch to a CMA7 precedes the unison of "More than life..."; and again a Bmi7 chord repeats as they sing one after the other, transitioning to a Dmi7 chord for a slightly

darker tone. The brighter major sevenths and unisons alternating with darker minor sevenths and lyric syncopation in the first part of the opening serve to expose the imperfect relationship of the Baker and his wife (Sondheim).

The Act I Opening does not center itself on the couple again until Part 8, where the key and chord progression are both modulated a half step down from the beginning of the musical. Here, the dialogue consists of an argument that reflects upon the fickle pride of the Baker, in which he dismisses his wife from the adventure to obtain his child. Simultaneously, the new key is darker than the original simply by relativity; the addition of the synthesizer to the chord repetition warms the timbre; and the dynamic of the music has been lowered from mezzo-piano to piano, making the background music sound more like an echo of a struggle than a call to the woods. Throughout Part 8, the Baker and his wife sing rhythmically independent of one another, and chromatic steps build up throughout the chords as they prepare to leave the safety of their cottage. These dissonant devices build up not only to Part 9 but also emphasize the conflict between the Baker and the Baker's Wife that is now explicit in the dialogue.

Hence, the first impressions and portraits presented by the Opening of the musical define the Baker and his wife as "an ordinary rooted couple from Brooklyn who get drawn into a magic world" (Holden). In layman's terms, this is a typical couple with their disagreements: the man with his pride, and the woman with indignant inferiority. The next musical appearance of either character is in a short underscore just before meeting Jack and buying 'the cow as white as milk'. Here, the conflict is simply further explicated. The key, F# major, is enharmonic to the previous appearance in G flat major, literally echoing Act I Opening, Part 8; and before the Baker's Wife actually enters, a tense and continuous G#mi(add b5, #5) chord mirrors the Baker's fears and confusions alone in the woods. The repetition of the key foreshadows the conflict, and the

Baker's Wife appears on the scene; the ensuing dialogue is backed by soft chromatic build up, where a single chord is repeated as one note is incremented by half or whole steps each measure to create dissonance in an otherwise bright BMA9 chord. There is also a clarinet solo that is strung smoothly in with the Baker's Wife's singing; this is a contrast to the almost grouchy bassoon nature of the Baker which again appears as they sing one after the other, as a conversation rather than a duet. This underscore serves to reiterate the innate conflict just before a turning point in the plot, where they obtain the first of four crucial items towards getting their wish (Sondheim).

This innate conflict seems to have no explicit basis up until this turning point, where Sondheim finally reveals the personality clash between the Baker and his wife. The songs "Maybe They're Magic" and "Baker's Reprise" serve to directly compare the two protagonists and provide vital insight into both characters that compliments the lyrics. In the former, the Baker's Wife has her first solo part, and she enters at a 'moderate' pace in the key of B major. B major is commonly referred to as "the key of wild passions" (Steblyn); this compliments her motivated, outgoing, and changeable self as seen in this number. She begins backed by legato strings, and an occasional French horn entrance. These create a warm, endearing tone as she alluringly appeals to the Baker. This tone transitions suddenly to staccato, alla marcia chords as her insistence and confidence build into one of the Baker's Wife's most operatic, a cappella moments of the musical. On its own, "Maybe They're Magic" points to the extroverted confidence of the Baker's Wife, as well as her fluctuating personality. However, inspection of "Baker's Reprise" shortly afterward in the play reveals it to be the musical antithesis of "Maybe They're Magic". The lyrics' melody, the basic I-VI chord progression, and tempo acceleration throughout the reprise directly parallel the exposition of the Baker's Wife, while the differences

serve to expose the solitary nature of the Baker, as this is the first time he is given a number alone as well. The first contrast is the style difference: while his wife begins ‘moderately’, signifying control of her own pace, he begins singing ‘*in pain*’ and ‘Rubato’. Secondly, his music is played only by pizzicato violins, as opposed to legato, smooth strings with warm pedal tones. Both of these give the impression that he is indecisive, unsure, and less fixated on his task than his wife. This is again reinforced by the multiple caesuras in his melodic line.

Although he is evidently less confident than his wife, the Baker *is* able to resolve himself, as the music obtains “Piú mosso” and finally truncates. A closer comparison is necessary to explain this occurrence: for example, instrumentation analysis reveals that while almost the entire backdrop for the “Baker’s Reprise” is pizzicato strings, the parallel music for the Baker’s Wife involves every scored instrument playing a part in interwoven melodies and rhythms. Additionally, the Baker’s final bar of singing is accompanied by single note patterns, while the equivalent bar in “Maybe They’re Magic” contains fully dictated chords; the Baker’s Wife then continues, while the conclusion for the Baker is almost carelessly left to the orchestra. The conclusion of this comparison is that the Baker’s resolve is incredibly simpler than his wife’s. To reinforce this idea, “Baker’s Reprise” is in the key of F major, often known as “the key of complaisance and calm” (Steblin). While the Baker’s Wife is dramatic, complex, and decisive, the Baker can only resolve his self-conflict to a certain degree of simplicity, as shown by the chord and instrumentation comparisons. This means that the Baker is a very simplistic character underneath his desires to complete the quest for a child on his own. Furthermore, while the antithesis of the two musical numbers is indicative of many character traits, “Baker’s Reprise” comes chronologically second due to its dependence on “Maybe They’re Magic”. The basic chord, rhythm, and form patterns throughout both numbers are nearly identical; thus, the

framework for the Baker's resolution of conflict has been set by his wife's resolution of conflict (Sondheim). The pattern here introduces the idea that the Baker is unknowingly dependent upon his wife to resolve his self-conflicts and insecurities.

Thus far, the music of the play has introduced the Baker as a man who, in attempting to get his wish, has been in conflict with his wife because of his attempts at independence. However, on his own in an underscore and in "Baker's Reprise", he becomes confused and disoriented until his wife's personality and mindset resolve his self-conflict. Likewise, the music of the first act establishes the Baker's Wife as an excitable, decisive character whose importance is not yet fully appreciated. Arguably, the Baker and his wife are like two puzzle pieces that have only been fitted together on the wrong sides. With this analogy in mind, the characters have been musically foreshadowed to fit together correctly. In terms of the plot, the expositions of the characters call for a climatic duet where the Baker accepts the fact that he cannot get his wish on his own and the Baker's Wife finally presents her love for the Baker undiminished by his pride.

Coincidentally, "It Takes Two" is the resulting synergy in the musical where the Baker and the Baker's Wife finally unite in the realization that their dependence is necessary. In the most general sense, the plot-complimenting form of this piece is *ababc*, where *a* is the Baker's Wife's music, *b* is the Baker's music, and *c* is a duet between them and the synthesis of both musical styles. This is a climax in the form of the music, which parallels a climax in character development. The Baker's Wife opens the number in Bb major, the "key of cheerful love" (Steblin), reflecting her happiness as well as endearing to the Baker. Her introduction is smooth with many slurs, a tempo fluctuation, and the plain, warm tone of the lower half of a piano. In the second half of her melodic line, there is a beautiful, more complex chord progression of vi7-vi2-IV-ii(6/5), holding a pedal tone and continuing a steady quarter-note pulse that lets the music



flow while giving it a sustained, more emotional style. These characteristics reflect the best of her musical personality: variance, complexity, and passion. It is interesting to note that in order to emphasize the newfound pure connection between the Baker and his Wife, the transitions between sections of this number are quite smooth. As an example, the end of the first segment involves the quarter note pulse of the music characteristic to the Baker's Wife gradually picking up triplet anacrusis, as the bass pedal tone begins to lift into an anacrusis on beat 4 as well. As the Baker picks up where his wife left off, the triplets flow into '*swing eighths*', and the bass continues its rhythm while changing its articulation to staccato. While the shorter notes here pattern the Baker's previous musical background, overall it seems that the Baker has musically changed drastically with his acceptance of his wife's role from hesitance to decisive freestyle. Using his wife's style for framework, the Baker finally realizes that his individualism can only be achieved ironically through dependence. The most significant characteristic of his new style is Sondheim's first use of a mode: G flat mixolydian. This mode transitions from the indecisive key of G flat that recurs in the Opening and "Baker's Reprise" into a mode that gives the music a bluesy tone, almost exhibiting embarrassment and subtly changing the Baker's musical infrastructure (Comp). His individualism is also reinforced by the swing eighths which are also uncharacteristic to the musical thus far; these notes are additionally played by the flute and clarinet, both of which are not characteristic to the instrumentation of the Baker. The integration of woodwinds into the music further hints at the acceptance of his wife's style, and yet the Baker's basic simplicity is still evident in the overall chord progression: the chord progression of the Baker's first solo is a repetitive oscillation between two chords, usually a fourth apart (Sondheim).

In the second half of “It Takes Two”, the styles of the Baker and his wife become more distinct, and finally combine. The Baker’s Wife’s music incorporates the bassoon of the Baker in evermore frequent triplet anacrusis as she repeats her melody from the beginning of the song with fuller chords. The Baker again seems to nearly change style completely, singing in D Lydian while his music makes use of various techniques such as secondary dominance and syncopation that are not characteristic to his original style. His backdrop begins with quarter note staccatos with which he has previously been associated, and transitions to slurred eighths that accompany rich chromatic, secondary dominant progressions to D major. These all reflect the newfound complexity of his personality that comes directly from association with his wife, while his wife is evidently able to express herself without being repressed by the Baker’s pride. Finally, at the end of his second solo, the Baker transitions into a duet with his wife in “the key of triumph”, D major (Steblin).

The climax of the song occurs when the first harmony of the musical is sung as the styles of the Baker and his wife combine brilliantly into the most powerful four measures of the entire musical. The long, minor seventh pedal tones of the strings, the triplet anacrusis by the characteristic instruments i.e. clarinet and bassoon, the pulsing staccato quarter notes, and the vi7-vi2-V/IV-ii7 progression all synthesize at the highest dynamic level of the song to compliment the vocal harmony of moving thirds and produce the perfect music to represent a perfect relationship. This climax and synergy is the ultimate representation of the triumph of love in the Baker’s life as well as his wife’s: the initial conflict of pride and love is resolved because the Baker realizes who he is without his wife. Furthermore, the love that finally brings them together is what causes the musical epiphany as well as the plot epiphany soon to follow: the couple succeeds in obtaining the items needed for a child. Thus, through compare and contrast

the first act of Into the Woods presents the Baker as simplistic and fragile, yet loving and adaptive; simultaneously the Baker's Wife is passionate and independent, yet restrained. Once lost in the woods, the Baker realizes and allows the dependence between them, and is finally cured of hesitance and insecurity, while his wife finally is able to express herself: it is this transformation that is best represented in the music, and shows love to be the driving force of both characters.

As conclusive as the first act is, the second act has more to say about the real world. Sondheim was known to incorporate prominent social issues into his works, and Into the Woods is no exception. Unfortunately, the portrayal of marriage in the first act, however touching and idyllic, does not seem to parallel the actual relationships in society today. After using musical dexterity and manipulation to transform the defective into the perfect, Sondheim proceeds in the second act to sharply contrast a utopia with a dystopia.

The Baker and his wife are two unique characters of the play in this sense: the second act is not a continuation of the first, but rather a separate entity as another book on the shelf. This effect is not evident in the plot alone, but only explicable by the musical repetition. For contrast, it is evident through the Act II Opening dialogue that all the characters still wish for more than they have gained in the first act. The music, however, reveals a significant separation between the Baker, his wife, and the other characters: the unyielding presence of conflict. Cinderella's conflict with her family has vanished; Jack has newfound peace with his mother; and even though the Witch has become more hostile to Rapunzel, it is crucial to notice that her conflict came into existence at the close of the first act. With this context in mind, the Act II Opening, Part 1 orchestration is far too similar to that of Act I. Indeed, the music of the other characters reflects another wish; but the entrance of the Baker and his wife is evidence that their state of

conflict has not changed as the other characters' has. The rhythmic alternation, the clarinet and bassoon doubling voices, and the cries of the baby create the same tension that existed between the Baker and his wife initially; hence, the personality clash has returned, and it seems as if the story is starting anew for these two characters.

Progressing into Part 2, the conflict between the Baker and the Baker's Wife is much worse in harmonic analysis than it was in Part 8 of the Act 1 Opening. One underscore in particular as they speak calmly foreshadows something much worse than an argument: everything seems to fluctuate. The tempo slows, then returns to 'A tempo, poco rubato' and finally loses all sense of rubato. The key switches from G major to E minor, the key of restlessness (Steblin), and even touches D Mixolydian. The chords exhibit secondary dominance and accidentals, and even the instrumentation alters every measure from strings to the flute, clarinet and piano, and back again. All these musical traits underlie dialogue that does not seem out of ordinary, and serve to foreshadow the end of the relationship.

The benefit of Act 1 to Act 2, if they are treated as separate books rather than successive chapters, is to provide background to the conflict between the couple; hence, Sondheim does not need to provide another personality explication like that seen in "Maybe They're Magic" or "Baker's Reprise". Chronologically, the next appearance is that of the Baker's Wife as she meets Cinderella's Prince, betrays her husband, and dies a sudden death. The reason behind this cause-effect relationship is questioned by many: one of the most credible theories involves an investigation of the Baker's Wife and her 'challenge to the deeper story of postmodernism itself' (Fulk). However, this theory in particular forgets that Stephen Sondheim could have easily written poetry about his ideals; the music, once again, reveals Sondheim's personal judgment of adultery.

The Baker's Wife's dance with the prince involves a repetitive song, "Any Moment", as characteristic to the Prince's musical style: steady, rolling eighth notes, constant I-IV chord progressions, dynamics all centered around mezzo-piano, and unchanging instrumentation. The Act 1 analysis of the Baker's Wife, in contrast, gives her many creative aspects in terms of style. But as the Prince leaves the Baker's Wife from the glade, the transition into "Moments in the Woods" is the last type of music we expect to hear from the Baker's Wife: repetitive orchestration and rhythm. The first twenty-one measures of the song are exact reverberations of the Prince; the next six measures are the Baker's Wife waking up from her dream, attempting to shake off the repetition by changing time, tempo, key, and instrumentation. She tends to sing in common time, but literally stutters between it and the Prince's beat in three; the bassoon of the Baker irritates her as it plays grace notes that emphasize the stutter effect; and she finally manages to settle into B flat major, ironically the key of a "clear conscience" (Steblin). As she transitions into 'her own style', however, it is evident that the Prince's motifs are embedded into the Baker's Wife's music. Hints of "It Takes Two" sneak in during smooth lines, and she even maintains her a cappella standards. But unfortunately, her fate is determined because, indeed, she cannot accept the Prince as a 'moment in the woods'. The rolling eighth notes underneath the "It Takes Two" motif, the caesuras, and the I-IV chord progression betray her music as the Prince echoes in her soul.

It would seem as if Sondheim would have been forgiving if the Baker's Wife had not mentally let the Prince become a part of her past. In lieu of the fact that we all make mistakes, her mistake is different and cannot be forgiven because she accepts it without regret. Because she loses her musical style due to her actions, she is no longer a complement to the Baker and his insecurity; unfit to be a wife or even sing a duet, Sondheim disposes of her. This is extremely

characteristic of Sondheim, described as one who “illuminat[ed] levels of discontent that exist within love and marriage relationships” (Sisler). Through the Baker’s Wife, he administers his own righteous judgment, justified through music.

After this, the Baker is consequently destined to never be fulfilled, as he was at the climax of Act 1. His first reaction is panic, as shown by his opening lines to “Your Fault”. This is a hectic song which uses keys, modes, cluster chords, and other tools to create utter harmonic chaos as it collides with the distress of other characters. It even opens in A flat major: the key of judgment (Steblyn). This, however, is an extremely subjective song in terms of focus on the Baker; thus, more about his transformation after his wife’s death is revealed after he is given time to emerge from his panic. “No More” is the sad song of the Baker without his significant other, and a lament of a missing half. This explains why the song opens with his father, the Mysterious Man, as the Baker attempts to fill the gap in his musical style. He begins where his wife left off: the key of a clear conscience, B flat major. This sets the tone as a sort of pitiful sorrow, and appeals to the audience subliminally with emotion. Not only is the Baker righteous in his key, in contrast to his wife before her demise, but even after she is gone he uses the memories of her music to piece his own together—the key of B flat patterns not only “Moments in the Woods”, but additionally the opening chords of their happiest time—“It Takes Two”. The clarinet and bassoon even play in unison for his intro. Another pattern Sondheim uses to develop the tone is the use of almost exclusively major and minor seventh chords—the same chords used to begin the musical. Combined with the piano and synthesizer, these techniques make a rich, longing tone that looks back on much of the musical.

In “No More”, the music displays that the Baker finally lets go of his wife. He pieces together his introductory music with her techniques, and is at a loss to any further music until the

Mysterious Man assists his form one last time...”Like father, like son”. The Baker’s rhythm at measure 83 simplifies to half note unison; the full orchestra takes part in the harmony; and the chord progression eventually reverts to the Baker’s I-IV that appears throughout all of his music. Without his wife, the Baker settles down to achieve ultimate simplicity. This is the core of the Baker’s personality that could not be observed in the first act. By steady decline in musical complexity, Sondheim explicates the innate nature of the Baker as almost beneficially simplistic, relaxed, and rational. Fortunately for the Baker, “No One is Alone” (Sondheim).

Overall, the drastic changes and differences of the music of the Baker and his wife reveal their personalities, their faults, and the reasons they end up the way they do. Sondheim’s orchestration in this case truly displays the power of love: the first act is a representation of love in its perfection, while the second act criticizes the relationships of the real world, judges the boundaries of forgiveness, and even suggests that one like the Baker can always find love in places other than marriage. To Sondheim, musical synthesis represents the existence of the soul mate; chord dissonance remembers conflict; permanent changes in style signify betrayal of oneself; and the absence of a musical framework reveals the true nature of the average person. Certainly, dialogue and plot cannot delve as deep into a composer’s meaning.

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