

A Dissertation Wasted with Tom Lehrer: A Performance Guide to Musical Memetics

by

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This is dedicated to my wife Brittney, without whom there is no music and no humor.
For all you do, for how you support, for how you care- with all my words, with all my ways,
with all my life- I thank you.

I love you more than any word can mean; I love you more than anyone can be.

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“*I wanted to be a graduate student forever. They want you to be a Ph.D. Unfortunately, you can’t be a graduate student *and* a Ph.D. at the same time, but I exhausted all the courses.*”
- Tom Lehrer, interview with Gerald Nachman

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Writing a document of original scholarship is an isolating experience. There is a certain ticklish anticipation in creating an original idea that seems clear, relevant, and multifaceted. This feeling is simultaneously exhausting and revitalizing, which inspires one to continue defining the full parameters of that original idea, wherever its results may lead.

What invariably follows these feelings is a non-linear trajectory of sudden fears, speechless frustration, and head-tilting indecision, all while in real time of daily chores, weekly responsibilities, sudden expenses, life events, and so on. To do so with additional hindrances that don’t accompany my personal identifiers and socio-economic status is something I couldn’t contemplate; I applaud and support those achieving their goals despite such obstacles.

The results of this project have been an invigorating and inspiring challenge for me, and it has been a privilege to do so with the support of the people listed above. With my deepest thanks and my warmest affection, I present the following to the field of music.

Abstract

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The musical works of Tom Lehrer (b. 1928) can be broadly defined as “comedy songs,” and they represent a small *oeuvre* of musical output compared to his more frequently and rigorously studied contemporaries. Even considering his musical success, Lehrer’s use of popular song forms and satirical poetic content have stood in contrast to the devices more commonly used to define a “classically trained” singer’s education.

However, in identifying and analyzing his musical trademarks using twenty-first century research methodologies, Lehrer’s music can be more accurately defined under the term musical “memetics.” Memetics is the field of study surrounding the concept of a *meme*, which is defined as “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*.” More specifically, studying musical memes treats musical content as tangible ideas that can be spread between humans to connote meaning. Using this definition of memetics for Lehrer’s works is effective because memes demonstrate how cultural information is exchanged and evolves over time.

This document is a performance guide to the musical works of Tom Lehrer: it defines musical memetics and applies it to his songs; outlines the humor in his music using those definitions of musical memetics and similar terms; contextualizes and provides guidance on how to perform and program Lehrer’s music as a self-accompanying vocalist; and establishes a supplemental performance method for twenty-first century musicians seeking to seriously sing funny songs as part of their music education. Synthesizing these resources into an original performance requires in-depth analysis, practice, and rigor like that of any other *lied*, operatic aria, song cycle, or recital plan.

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Introduction: Into the Meme Pool

“Life is like a sewer: what you get out of it depends on what you put into it.”

-*An Evening (Wasted) with Tom Lehrer*, program notes

The idea of seriously writing about funny songs has always intrigued me. I can remember being first introduced to the musical styles of Bo Burnham, who was at the time just a burgeoning young musician and had started to make some headway on the new video sharing platform YouTube. I couldn't help but admire his songs, the sense of danger inherent in some of the lyrics, the speech-like pace of his musical phrases, and the way it was presented as one singer accompanying himself using pop song chords and progressions.

I was hooked, and not just because Burnham and I were very close in age and background; we still are technically, but you won't see me dropping a Netflix special anytime soon.¹ There was something about the music itself that I kept trying to understand, dictate, and, in some cases, recreate. Since then, I have tried to learn more about comedy songs, comedians who use music, musicians who use comedy, and what is “funny” when set to music.

After completing my master's degree and after two years as a guest lecturer at the college level, I created a recital project for my voice studio that centered around the theme of comedy songs, calling it “Opera Fools Day.” This semester-long project resulted in over twenty-five students from three different voice studios and multiple majors. Students brought songs between studios, learned new songs from musical scores specifically designed with humor in mind, and highlighted music from five different languages and multiple styles. The program consisted of

¹ Rachel Syme, “‘Inside’ Reviewed: Bo Burnham’s Virtuoso Portrait of a Mediated Mind,” *The New Yorker*, June 5, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-television/inside-reviewed-bo-burnhams-virtuosic-portrait-of-a-mediated-mind>.

rousing audience participation, small groups, joke-telling, and a joint chorus finale of “The Lusty Month of May” from Rodgers & Hammerstein’s *Camelot*.

From this semester of work in the voice studio, I noticed that students were not only motivated to learn and understand the jokes embedded in their assigned pieces, but students demonstrably applied transferable skills to their more so-called “studious” pieces with more success after participating in the project. This suggested to me that there was more to be said about the research and performance potential of planning songs written for comedic effect.

It was during this project in 2019 that I became more formally acquainted with the works of Tom Lehrer (b. 1928). Loans from the library and a plethora of recordings helped me find the musical scores and an underground fan base of all things Tom Lehrer. I found myself digging into the music as if it was a serious score analysis. I found myself listening to the recordings as routinely as I had done as an undergraduate student listening to the works of Schubert, Brahms, Strauss, Puccini, and Verdi. I found myself making comparisons to Lehrer and Bo Burnham in their performance and songwriting style. I found myself studying funny songs as seriously as I was any other. Researching Tom Lehrer’s works inspired me to study how he wrote his songs, where he found funny material, and how he transferred them into a performance.

Chapter 1: Context- Defining Memetic and Germetic Music

On his mainstream popularity: “The people from *The Ed Sullivan Show*...said, ‘Oh, we really love your show. If you ever have anything we can use, let us know.’ I think that summed it up...”

-Interview with Gerald Nachman

1.1 Using Musical Memes as a Twenty-First Century Musician

Music can move us in many ways. The score itself can do this, where a composer can repeat melodies or harmonic gestures, creating a kind of musical narrative for its listeners to follow. Audiences, too, can feel collectively moved to applaud, cheer, boo, or laugh after witnessing a live performance. Another instance would be in reflecting on the stories surrounding well-known premieres, commissions, or productions. Musicians can be inspired to, for example, write or perform music as a response to news stories, moments of political or cultural significance, or personal life events. Music is a medium of expression for humans to share their thoughts, and learning how to perform music well means that there can be a collective understanding of what to listen for in a musical performance.

Learning to move audiences through performance has evolved to fit the needs of twenty-first century culture. Summarized by Nathinee Chucherdwatanasak on current skills for musicians:

“...twenty-first century music ensembles and orchestras have expanded their visions, missions, and activities beyond the realm of live performances, which means that today’s musicians are encouraged-sometimes even required- to acquire skills beyond excellent musicianship ...”²

Similar research has been conducted in the classical music industry when using social media applications to engage with their audiences.³ Using popular music trends is also a way to

² Nathinee Chucherdwatanasak, "Creative Destruction, Perpetual Rebirth: Classical Music in the Early Twenty-First-Century United States." (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2022), 32, ProQuest (30353313).

³ Hang Thi Tuyet Nguyen, "Audiences' Engagement with Twitter and Facebook Live during Classical Music Performances: Community and Connectivity through Live Listening Experiences." (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2018), 79, ProQuest (10982340).

broaden engagement, target marketing strategies, and promote business through a digital platform.⁴ The value of learning about music in a changing environment is a crucial, ongoing one, and continues to provide impactful conversations to modern problems.

For musicians, this new media and vocational landscape allows for an opportunity to more clearly define what type of music is being used and how. I submit that music can be defined by its prevalence and sustainability between people, demonstrating its effectiveness as a means of communication. Using comedy songs and musical memes can demonstrate a future musician's knowledge and transfer it to contemporary audiences. As one example, students can define the trends of humor they observe and consider the implications of using music to accompany it, from the music of Richard Wagner accompanying the antics of Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd⁵ to the implications of the humorous cowbell as seen on *Saturday Night Live*⁶ and even to current trends on TikTok.⁷

For the purposes of this project, I will define and illustrate the performance aspects involved with the works of Tom Lehrer (b. 1928), an American college lecturer and musical satirist. When I first came across Lehrer's works, I felt his music was worth researching, whether this was in performing, teaching, or analyzing his works. I continued to come across multiple definitions of the type of borrowing that Lehrer was using in his songs. This ranged from

⁴ Krysten Stein, "And how does that make You Feel?: Unpacking the Phenomenon of TikTok." (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2024), 164, ProQuest, (31693616).

⁵ Daniel Ira Goldmark, "Happy Harmonies: Music and the Hollywood Animated Cartoon," (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2001), 185, ProQuest, (3005967).

⁶ John Matthew McGovern, "The Cowbell in Music and Culture." (DMA diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2023), 1-3, ProQuest, (30521999).

⁷ Jumi Akinfenwa, "A Brief History of 'Cursive Singing', from Amy Winehouse to TikTok." *VICE*, July 21, 2020, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/cursive-singing-tiktok-trend-explained/>.

understanding how to label partial elements of musical borrowing⁸ to including context behind the jokes present in standards of the classical repertoire⁹ to bridging the gap between a single musical element and the way it is interpreted between different humans.¹⁰

This led me to observe that Lehrer frequently used melodic and harmonic fragments in an easily identifiable form that could be traced back to a previous song. These songs carried specific historic and cultural connotations, which Lehrer in turn used in his songs as additional comments in his original arrangements or writing. More than parody, not quite as intricate as specific forms of musical borrowing, and not even as in-depth or continuous as the concept of *leitmotif* or diegetic music, I concluded that Lehrer was writing and performing something that seemed like the musical equivalent of a meme.

1.2 For Performance

With historical context in mind, coupled with the depth and specificity of borrowed material, I found that the definition by Steven Jan best describes the works of Tom Lehrer, that of a musical meme: “musical memes exist fundamentally as neuronal interconnections but are manifested in the form of graphical and sonorous patterning.”¹¹ Jan’s use of the phrase “neuronal interconnections,” or ideas as processed through human brains, represents the association made between a piece of music and its place in a performance or musical score. This definition seemed to most appropriately explain Lehrer’s use of borrowed music in his songs.

⁸ Bradley Thomas Sowell, "An Analysis of Ben Moore’s Comedy Songs using J. Peter Burkholder’s Music-Borrowing Techniques," (DMA diss., The University of Memphis, 2024), 24-25, ProQuest (30996477).

⁹ Dennis Davis, "Humor, Structure, and Methodology in Selected Works by Peter Schickele." (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2010), 82, ProQuest, (3472540).

¹⁰ Santiago Diazgranados Berenguer, “Modular Musical Memes” (DMA diss., University of Miami, 2023), 16, ProQuest, (30484709).

¹¹ Steven Jan, *The Memetics of Music* (Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 29.

This theory was first defined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 when describing the development of human culture as a parallel but separate phenomenon of evolution. Rather than attempting to relate changes in human culture using the terms and principles of evolutionary biology, Dawkins lifts a simple suffix from the Greek word “mimeme” to summarize the description of a single unit of cultural action or thought that can be exchanged between brains of at least two humans.¹²

In a subset field of study, musical memetics can be defined as the study of musical memes, or *musemes*, as defined by Santiago Diazgranados Berenguer.¹³ Whereas memes in Dawkins’ view is a collection of all ideas spread between human brains, Berenguer and Jan clarify this concept of biological replication and apply it to musicology. In his seminal and aptly named *The Memetics of Music*, Jan details defining a musical meme:

- 1) “...musical memes exist fundamentally as neuronal interconnections but are manifested in the form of graphical and sonorous patterning...”¹⁴
- 2) “...drawing upon the central principles of replicator theory, most importantly the notions of *longevity*, *fecundity* and *copying-fidelity*...small packets of musical information...are the most likely candidates for musical memes...”¹⁵

Further, Jan’s three identifiers for a musical meme are defined according to Dawkins’ terms:

¹² Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 4th edition, (Oxford University Press, 2006), 248-249.

¹³ Berenguer, “Modular Musical Memes,” xi.

¹⁴ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

- 1) *Longevity*- The ability of a meme to be repeated in theory, represented in music by its appearance in recordings or musical notation.
- 2) *Fecundity*- The power of a meme to be successfully distributed and adopted between communities.¹⁶ Through continuous repetition between listeners, the meme comes to represent a specific musical idea between composers and audiences of different times, cultures, or performance practices.
- 3) *Copying-fidelity*- The strength of a meme to be repeated in a single, indivisible, unit. “The more concise a meme the greater the likelihood that it will survive the travails of replication intact.”¹⁷

By using these definitions within this project, musical scholars and performers can begin to identify musical idioms, form, and structure as more than singular ideas on their own, but as a continuation of previous ideas. Such research and scholarship will continue to develop the comedy song subcategory in the art song genre.¹⁸ This demonstrates that a meme can be copied and reiterated in one form or another, even if not every form of musical syntax is used to copy it.

To take an example of Tom Lehrer’s works, one of his most well-known songs is “The Elements,” which does not contain any original composition, but is a parody of an aria from William S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan’s 1879 comic opera *The Pirates of Penzance*. The original solo, “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General,” is a 19th century parody of the sentiments behind a military leader who is a master of general knowledge, but self-admittedly deficient in his vocational area of alleged expertise. The song is labeled as a “patter song,” which is one categorized as one of many types of comedy¹⁹ due to its monosyllabic treatment of words

¹⁶ Ibid., 33.

¹⁷ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 34.

¹⁸ Andrew Lee Harper, "The Art of Humorous Song: Examining Humorous Songs through the Lens of Selected Song Sets," (DMA diss., The University of Memphis, 2021), ProQuest (28643692), 60.

¹⁹ Ibid., iv. Harper cites two such subcategories to the comedic art song- the humorous song and the short, pithy song. Similar genres and song types can be thus defined, taking after Harper’s example.

in continuous eighth notes and punctuated by single long rests that double as a breath mark. This rate of speech moving as fast as the rhythm of the piece implies a loquacious attitude for the character, despite always being lost for a rhyme at the final stanzas before ultimately recovering with increasingly obscure references. The aria is a standard comedy song.

Lehrer makes a simple lyrical edit of this patter song about general knowledge to a “list song” naming all the names of the chemical elements. Recalling this melody and using it as a meme helps to streamline for a listener that there is a specific context through which to understand “The Elements” because of its relationship to the music and the compositional or dramatic context of the original song. With a collective understanding of a previous piece of music, Lehrer takes advantage of this knowledge base and creates songs that comment on these previous songs and song forms while also connecting to them with contemporary lyric subjects.

The only musical changes Lehrer employs is he omits the *Slower* third verse for what appears to be a lack of elements rather than a lack of imagination. Lehrer transposes the entire song from Eb major to C major, likely for his own comfort level. Finally, the musical gag “Shave and a Haircut” appears at the end of the song.²⁰ Apart from these changes, Lehrer’s parodic use of the Major-General’s Song is a clear example of a musical meme using Jan’s three essential factors: copying the original song some seventy-five years after its premiere; using the song to invoke a similar, humorous response; and staying faithful to the original score while conveying a new meaning with new lyrics. With the context of the original song in mind, coupled with the theoretical knowledge of how musical ideas are transferred, any changes to the music along with changes to the lyrics would indicate that the Major-General’s song is being used as a meme.

²⁰ Goldmark, “Happy Harmonies,” 91-92.

Using “The Elements” as one of the more definitive examples of Lehrer’s music as a meme should not misinform the reader; this is not to say that the entirety of Lehrer’s works are straight parody. On the contrary, this song is one of only three such works in Lehrer’s catalog that was entirely unoriginal in its musical form. This is also not to say that Lehrer is unique in borrowing songs from the western classical music repertoire as parody. One would need only listen to the selected works of Spike Jones²¹ or Carl Stalling’s work on the M-G-M series “Looney Tunes”²² to confirm the use of classical music parody.

Rewriting the lyrics while keeping the melody of the Major-General’s song is also not limited to Lehrer, as rudimentary online research shows at least forty-four different versions of the Major-General song used as the musical basis for parody.²³ Rather than proving Lehrer is unique in choosing this previous melody as a subject for parody, it is in his choosing this specific melody that demonstrates new, memetic musical ideas are a continuation from previously constructed material, whether from a single fragment or using a song in its entirety. This allows for a performer to give new interpretations to original music or add new material to the original music that highlights a new interpretation. Using music as a meme is also a new way to define music as an embedded code for furthering meaning. Using musical memes for comedic or parodic purposes is to make this coding explicit, direct, and most useful in conveying a collective meaning when hearing even a fragment of previous music in a new context.

²¹ Jordan R. Young, *Spike Jones Off the Record: The Man Who Murdered Music* (Past Times Publishing Co., 1984), 65-68.

²² Goldmark, “Happy Harmonies,” 184.

²³ @Jemdoc. “Parodies of ‘I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General,’” University of Maryland. July 28, 2024, accessed November 9, 2024, <https://www.cs.umd.edu/~gasarch/FUN/modmajgen.html>

In speaking specifically about musical ideas and the theoretical language associated, this research of musical memetics has furthered conversation about how musical ideas, patterns, and structures spread and maintain relevance between human brains. The work of Andrew Harper's categorizing humorous songs in classical song repertoire brings to light the benefits behind seriously studying funny songs and will also be referred to in this performance guide.²⁴ Similarly, Bradley Thomas Sowell's performance guide to the works of Ben Moore will be used as a companion piece to identify humorous musical moments in one composer's selected works.²⁵

This performance guide is meant to add to contemporary scholarship on comedy songs. To that effort, I will use Jan's definition of "memetic" music and include a second category of music that describes a broader, more generalized version of borrowed music. Rather than using "memetic" to mean a single unit of a musical idea, I will use a new term, "germetic," to describe the semi-memetic use of original musical structures, idioms, and diegesis that suggest a parody or meme of a larger musical style.

Whereas memetic music is an identifiable fragment of music that has been seen and performed before under a different title or style, germetic music is a fragment of music that is original in design but takes the place of a meme in its execution. A large majority of Tom Lehrer's memetic music presents itself in the piano introductions or interludes, whether as a quotation of a musical phrase from a previous piece or explicitly stated in the music as to its origins in classical or popular music. A smaller portion of Lehrer's musical gestures come from repeated chord progressions like the chord progressions found in popular music of his time (See **Figure 3.6 below**). Other examples of germetic music would be the use of chromatics as musical

²⁴ Harper, "The Art of Humorous Song," 7.

²⁵ Sowell, "An Analysis," 43.

commentary (See **Figure 2.3 below**) or writing musical gestures that respond to the lyrics with a kind of diegetic literalism (See **Figure 2.10 below, referring to a “horse gallop”**).

Other musical gestures will be described in later chapters as having the same effect as a musical meme while not being directly linked to a previous piece of music. There may be the potential of tracking similar musical gestures and categorizing them as memetic if they are seen with enough repetition. Memetic music is a more direct attribution to using borrowed music, whereas germetic music may have a coincidental, if not causal, link to a previous musical motif.

Using an additional label will help clarify some of the works of Tom Lehrer, as some of his pieces can be defined as being “memetic” according to Jan’s definition, but others fail to do so. Therefore, an additional portion of his songs can be defined as germetic, utilizing style and structure to connote meaning rather than direct borrowing. Identifying germetic music also involves tracking chord progressions, analyzing melodic interval patterns in the accompaniment, and connecting unique musical gestures back to the sung lyrics. (**Figure 1.1**)

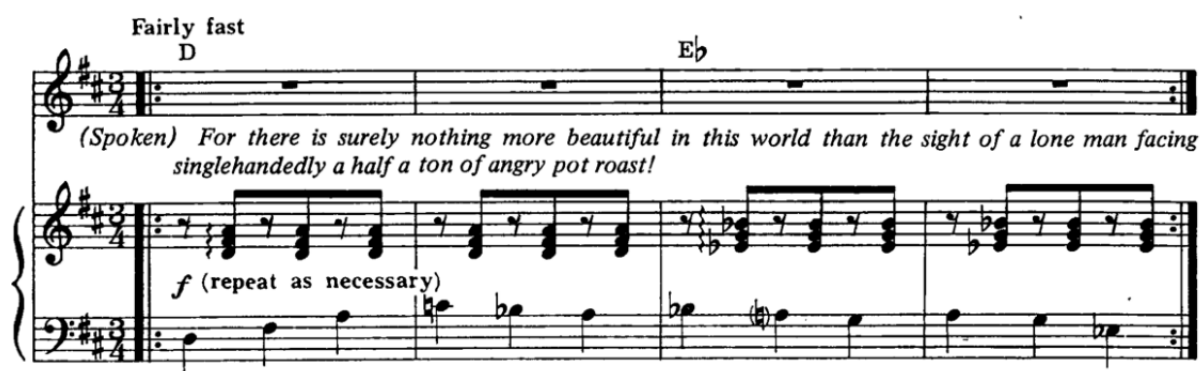


Figure 1.1 Example of *germetic* music, Spanish-style guitar playing, from “In Old Mexico” ²⁶

²⁶ Tom Lehrer and Ronald Searle, *Too Many Songs by Tom Lehrer with not enough drawings by Ronald Searle*. (Pantheon Books, 1981), 75.

For more on this, future students may search for the writings of James Peter Burkholder, who defines and outlines four such parody borrowing techniques. Sowell uses Burkholder's techniques and defines them thus,²⁷ with the fifth being Sowell's own:

- 1) *Paraphrase*- Restatement of a previous work in another form, whether by transposition, rhythmic alteration, use of modal scales, or other technical changes.
- 2) *Quotation*- Excerpted restatement of a previous work, retaining its original form for the entirety of the excerpted material.
- 3) *Stylistic Allusion*- Statement of musical material indicative of a historical style or compositional form of music, rather than recreating a single previous work.
- 4) *Quodlibet*- Statement of music containing multiple sources of previous works, written together to integrate their meaning.
- 5) *Interjection*- Repeated statement of paraphrased material within a single new work, very short in duration and independent of other borrowed material present.²⁸

Sowell very deftly defines Ben Moore's works through the lens of these techniques. However, there are two reasons for differentiating this project's analyses from Sowell's summaries.

First, Burkholder's research involves a process of investigating how the original and derivative music relate to each other, how the original music is altered, and how the new music functions within that relationship.²⁹ This process of determining musical function allows for multiple interpretations of the borrowed material, not simply reducing it to a single label of "parody." Instead, musicians and audiences can interpret borrowing in extra-musical terms such as a tribute, a dedication, nostalgia, a point of psychological triggering, or foreshadowing; parody can be included, but not necessarily given priority, among these interpretations. In the

²⁷ Sowell, "An Analysis," 15.

²⁸ Ibid., 34-35.

²⁹ Ibid., 13.

case of Tom Lehrer's works, analysis doesn't require detailed subcategories, as all his songs include one or another form of parody. With this limitation, one can analyze the relationship between old and new music in Lehrer's works to understand the musical joke.

Second, while Burkholder's borrowing techniques demonstrate how Lehrer borrows music, none of these addresses the relationship of written music as Jan describes using the parameters of longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity.³⁰ In a live performance setting, devoid of musical scores for audiences to equally analyze and follow, the music Lehrer borrows allows for the musical meme to inject meaning into a performance. Using a brief interjection of borrowed material can carry a lot of musical or cultural information if that meme is understood by its audience. If a previous piece of music is not referenced, then the audience's collective understanding of musical gestures they have heard in another setting could be a less specific, but equally effective, means of communication in a musical performance.

Distinguishing between memes and parody is noteworthy, as multiple scholars encroach upon the subject.^{31 32} The musical meme defines a single musical fragment, an essential unit of measurement rather than a large-scale copy of a previous piece of music. For this project, a

³⁰ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 39-45. Jan's definitions of memetic music can be further subdivided according to mutations in pitch, rhythm, and texture. Differences in the musical scores original and borrowed music could be synthesized between both Burkholder and Jan's findings, and future research may lead to a modified definition of musical borrowing because of such synthesis.

³¹ Harper, "The Art of Humorous Song," 41-42.

³² John P. Thomerson, "Parody as a Borrowing Practice in American Music, 1965-2015" (University of Cincinnati, 2017), 84-86. ProQuest (10760319). Thomerson writes at length on the instances of music being used for comedic purposes. Though not every meme is a joke, there is a parallel relationship between referencing music and referencing the subjects surrounding that music.

musical meme is different than *parody*, which is the description of the final artistic product of a new work that borrows previous musical material as its compositional frame.³³

In other words, memes are a part of a new piece of music, but they are not necessary for the piece to be performed. Further, parody may focus on the new work in its entirety compared to its source material. It is in the detail of singular or fragmented musical material that the musical meme concerns itself, which is more related to how people apply their knowledge of previous material to new works. A parody is a new statement on borrowed music, whereas a meme is a somewhat preset fragment of material that demonstrates an idea using music as its medium.

Applying this distinction in practice, I return to the instance of creating a performance guide following Sowell's findings. Such songs may be performed for, and programmed to, an audience that has a more comprehensive background knowledge of the musical and comedic material presented.³⁴ By comparison, Lehrer's music is a reflection of his "undergraduate" personality,³⁵ where both achieve the same standards of Burkholder's borrowing on a level that does not require a musical background to understand the musical jokes.

However, Sowell's definition of musical interjection is, debatably, an example of a meme in that they are small, digestible amounts of borrowed musical material that recall for the listener a previous piece of music. For the purposes of connecting meaning, Lehrer uses memes in his songs to allow the music to comment on his lyrics and their intended message, rather than

³³ Ibid., 19.

³⁴ Sowell, "An Analysis," 36-37.

³⁵ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 125-126. In interviewing Mr. Lehrer, Nachman remarks that Lehrer looked "...very much like...a smart-ass math major goofing off..."

speaking as a musical reference about itself, as Ben Moore's works do.³⁶ For these reasons, I would contend that a musical meme is a more accurate definition for Lehrer's music.

Rather, it is in Lehrer's deliberate inclusion of specific borrowed music that gives a musicological framework of how his music works. This is not to say that Lehrer's songs cannot also be defined using the technical terms of musical paraphrase, quotation, quodlibet, stylistic allusion, or interjection. These borrowing techniques partially address the connection between musical motifs and how they are written. What it fails to address is how those connections are perceived by its audience. With a memetic theory of music,³⁷ musicians and audiences can connect a piece of borrowed music back to its source. These ideas associated with a specifically ordered musical melody, tune, cadence, or even standalone chord can create an interpretation for performer and audience in a way that explaining a piece may not achieve.

What remains to be answered is why Lehrer included the music he did using these borrowing techniques to elicit a specific kind of laughter. This is the scholastic intersection between Sowell's new definition of an interjection as a borrowing technique,³⁸ Berenguer's use of a museme to demonstrate the effectiveness of written musical communication,³⁹ and Jan's

³⁶ Sowell, "An Analysis," 19.

³⁷ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 103-105. The theory of musical memetics extends to music being associated another, nonmusical, verbal-conceptual meme. Jan connects the musical material of a "lament" theme with the larger concept of "death and grief."

³⁸ Sowell, "An Analysis," 13. Sowell's invention of the term "interjection" as a borrowing technique provides a definition against which Jan's memetic theory may be tested in this project.

³⁹ Berenguer, "Modular Musical Memes," 33. Berenguer references the power of written musical notation to describe what may be lost in the cultural exchange of musical memes. To quote: "...the measured prescription of rhythm and pitch developed as a high-fidelity medium for the time-resistant replication of musical memes...this is not a claim of the superiority of the Western canon, but an exploration of some of the mechanisms that prompted its development..."

delineations of the meme in musical practice.⁴⁰ With these research methods, one can begin to identify the borrowed musical material Lehrer uses, analyze its relationship to his lyrics, and determine how to highlight these in performance.

⁴⁰ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 111-116. Jan references studies in piano performance to demonstrate the process behind alterations in original and borrowed music, defining strong and weak memetic transmission with subsequent alterations in memetic content. The more direct the quotation, the stronger the unaltered meme is from the original, and *vice versa*.

Chapter 2: Memetic and Germetic References in Tom Lehrer's Music

“What good is having laurels if you can't sit on them?”
-Foreword, *Too Many Songs by Tom Lehrer*

2.1 Biographical Background

The musical works of American humorist Thomas Andrew Lehrer (b. 1928) are the results of occasional bouts of inspiration mixed with a knowledge of Western classical and popular music that produced some of the most enduring songs of humor, parody, and social commentary. American radio broadcaster Dr. Demento summarizes Lehrer's contribution to the comedy song: “Tom Lehrer is the most brilliant song satirist ever recorded.”⁴¹

Leaving superlatives to one side (or would that make them dextrolative?), Lehrer's music has amassed a cult following and has held a sustained relevance among comedians, musicians, and researchers. Including a gold record status on his 1965 LP *That Was the Year That Was*, (**Figure 2.18 below**) Lehrer has achieved his wishes for people to discuss and consume his music rather than being forced to do it himself,⁴² as his music is highlighted on multiple video platforms,⁴³ including livestream performances of his music.⁴⁴ Thanks in part to Mr. Lehrer's willingness to relinquish the publishing rights to his music, students can still find and immediately perform his works in full, on the condition that he is not recognized for it.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Barret Hansen, *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*, (Warner Brothers, 2000), 5.

⁴² “@honest2betsy,” YouTube, accessed December 12, 2023, www.youtube.com/honest2betsy

⁴³ “@TomLehrerWisdomChannel,” YouTube, accessed September 8, 2019, [@6funswede](http://www.youtube.com/@6funswede)

⁴⁴ “@SillySongswithLehrer,” YouTube, accessed November 7, 2023, [@TlSongsss](http://www.youtube.com/@TlSongsss)

⁴⁵ Tom Lehrer Songs, “Disclaimer,” last edited November 26, 2022, <https://tomlehrersongs.com/>

Lehrer's personal background involves a culturally Jewish upbringing, a love of musical theater, a voracious appetite for cinema,⁴⁶ and an advanced understanding of the interplay between music, wordplay, and wit, whether through crossword puzzles or through the lyrics of Gilbert & Sullivan. A self-described "semiprodigy,"⁴⁷ Lehrer literally skipped through his schooling at private schools Horace Mann and Loomis to graduate from Harvard University at the age of eighteen. After several years performing informally and for graduate school parties, Lehrer recorded his first album *Songs by Tom Lehrer* on January 22, 1953 and sold them at a 15% markup with rapid success across the Harvard campus.⁴⁸ *Songs by Tom Lehrer* "ended up selling 350,000 copies...all of his records have sold a little more than two million copies in fifty years, but sales remain steady. While most topical satire eventually dies, only a few of Lehrer's songs have grown stale. Equally impressive, the songs have been translated into about ten languages, despite their tricky rhymes, puns, and other Americanisms."⁴⁹

Lehrer served in the United States Army from 1955-57, working cryptography for the Department of Defense; he would later go on to work for the Los Alamos lab as a physicist.⁵⁰ A touring performance career of considerable reluctance followed from 1955-1960, with occasional performance up until his last formal performance in 1967.⁵¹ Lehrer went on to write songs for the American version of David Frost's satirical news series *That Was the Week that Was*, and another for a commission to write songs for a children's special in 1971-72 called *The Electric*

⁴⁶ Hansen, *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*, 7.

⁴⁷ Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*, (Pantheon Books, 2003), 129.

⁴⁸ Hansen, *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*, 9.

⁴⁹ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 133-134.

⁵⁰ Hansen, *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*, 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

Company.⁵² A tribute to Lehrer was set to a musical revue show in the form of the 1980 production *Tomfoolery*.⁵³ It was produced in part by Cameron Mackintosh, who later went on to produce Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*. Lehrer graciously accepts most of the credit for the latter's subsequent success.

Dating Lehrer's writing and performing career as early as 1945 and as late as 1970, the peak of his career may be seen between 1953 and 1965. Future students can gather more meaningful information on Lehrer's music and lyrics by further examining these years in history. Lehrer would speak between musical numbers in his concerts and revues, where he would explain some of his songs and give some fragmented background into contemporary events.⁵⁴ These breaks between songs acted as verbal program notes, with jokes interspersed throughout. These notes would be ideal information to be gleaned from some of Lehrer's songs and of the environment around which they were written and performed.

In his own words, Tom Lehrer describes himself as "a sentimentalist at heart...if a show doesn't make me cry, it's not worth it...I really like to be moved...I make fun of sentimentality, not sentiment..."⁵⁵ He also describes the possibility of continuing in his career with pristine clarity: "There's a lot of funny things happening, but the idea is to do it in a minute and a half."⁵⁶ The American composer Peter Schickele, alias P.D.Q. Bach, seconded this view of the difficulty

⁵² Ibid., 20.

⁵³ Tom Lehrer, Jonathan Adams, Martin Connor, Tricia George, Cameron Mackintosh, and Robin Ray. *The words of Tom Lehrer set to graphics from the musical Intravaganza Tomfoolery: Souvenir lyric book*, (Samuel French Inc. 1980), 8-10.

⁵⁴ @TomLehrerWisdomChannel, YouTube, "Videos."

⁵⁵ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 147-148.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

of creating and sustaining musical satire and describes Tom Lehrer's music in terms of what makes comedy songs successful:

“Actual musical satire, real musical satire, isn't that easy to keep up for a long time, when you think of it. A lot of musical humor is basically funny lyrics, you know, like Tom Lehrer, and certainly a lot with Stan Freberg, it's really the lyrics that make [it] funny.”⁵⁷

Schickele goes on to describe how, for comedy songs to be successful, audiences must have some background knowledge of the music they are consuming to understand how a piece of music leads to humorous outcomes. He even uses Burkholder's moniker of *quodlibet* to categorize one of his own pieces that parody Mozartian style.⁵⁸ Schickele's observations demonstrate that musicians can perform borrowed music to convey humor to an audience, even if on a limited basis. Schickele also acknowledges Lehrer's impact on comedy songs and musical satire. These comments suggest that musicians can use musical memes to convey previous musical and cultural knowledge, including humor, in performance.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Peter Schickele, Alan Foster, and Buck Ross. *P.D.Q. Bach in Houston: We Have a Problem!* DVD, interview with KUHD radio. DVD directed for the stage by Buck Ross, directed for video by Alan Foster. Acorn Media U.S., 2006.

⁵⁸ Schickele, Foster, and Ross. *P.D.Q. Bach in Houston: We Have a Problem!* DVD, interview with KUHD radio.

⁵⁹ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 56.



Figure 2.1 Snapshot from *Tom Lehrer: Live in Copenhagen 1967*⁶⁰

Jeff Morris, who curates a playlist archive of *The Dr. Demento Show*,⁶¹ describes his take on Lehrer: “He’s proud of his musical career. He doesn’t want to be a star, but he doesn’t want to

⁶⁰ Hansen, *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*, liner photos.

dismiss his career. A lot of people can't understand how someone wouldn't want to be a star."⁶²

The irony of Tom Lehrer's life is not that he denied the life that he created, as if to say a performer's life is in debt to those that chose to receive his services, but that he never solely sought such recognition in the first place. Lehrer instead reclaimed his life, one of puzzles and routine and education, after a thoroughly enjoyable, if demanding, career in a field of music in which he found commendable international success and appreciation.

Celebrity and status in the musical world seemed to demand too much of Lehrer, expect too much of him, and assume too much of him. Doing too much of anything was not one of Lehrer's strong suits in any case.⁶³ If nothing else, describing Lehrer's music as memetic seems to be fitting, even if only paradoxically so. Once a musician borrows a piece of music from somewhere else and performs or writes it down for others to hear in that new environment, the meaning transcends the composer's intention and creates an idea for the audience to interpret. Continuously performing the same joke seems to be the part of a career in music performance that Lehrer enjoyed the least; yet this technique is what made his performances so engaging and what makes his music continue to hold value and interest up to the present day.

Discussing musical memes and how they are expressed between people allows musicians to create sounds that symbolize for the listener a cue for multiple abstract ideas, even if it does not prove anything beyond the act of performing. Spreading ideas, like genes, through a meme is

⁶¹ "The Demented Music Database!" Jeff Morris, The Rev. Warren Debenham, Mike Kieffer, Chris Mezzolesta, Tom McCown, J. Alan Septimus, John Lorentz, Evan L. Marcus, Paul A. Winders, Annie Sattler, Russ Josephson, Craig G. Andersen, Tim P. Ryan, J.D. Zack, Jon "Bermuda" Schwartz, Frank Merrill, Rob Killam, Elizabeth & William Simpson, Jason Howard, Dan White, Edwin Harvey Jr., David Tanny, Johnny Heering, and Dr. Demento, <https://dmdb.org/>

⁶² Jeff Morris, "Tom Lehrer Discussion," transcribed discussion with Evan Mitchell, June 26, 2024..

⁶³ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 134-135.

a way to deepen communication between people, and Tom Lehrer's music allows us to consider these same memes and judge their intended humor, critique, or irony by his deliberate choices as he wrote his songs.

2.2 Memetic and Germetic References in Tom Lehrer's Music

This section outlines memetic and germetic references in selected songs from Tom Lehrer's list of works in both paragraph and visual forms, to identify in greater detail "what is being parodied" by analyzing the musical forms presented in Lehrer's music.⁶⁴ As this chapter and subsequent chapters progress, I will analyze the concentration and frequency of memetic material present. For clarity of new research, I will divide Tom Lehrer's works into two categories of musical borrowing based on their intended function for performance purposes:

- 1) *Memetic*- Borrowed music that copies from a previous identifiable work. This could take the form of multiple borrowing techniques, from quotation to interjection and even paraphrase. Memetic references have a history of being borrowed to create new meaning, and recognizing this in Tom Lehrer's music helps trace the evolution of music as it is used in popular and art song forms.
- 2) *Germetic*- Original music that borrows from a broader style of music. This is most closely linked to the borrowing techniques of stylistic allusion, with an argument to be made that quodlibet is a synthesis of original music utilizing borrowed style, as opposed to a medley of borrowed music, which would fall under the memetic category. Germetic references are fragments of original music that has the potential to become memetic.

⁶⁴ Thomerson, "Parody," 38.

Jan further divides memes into smaller ideas known as *memotypes*, which are the realized musical components that make up a meme (intervals, scalar or modal pattern, and cadence types, etc.) and *mnemotypes*, which are singular unrealized or abstract musical concepts (a single interval, one block chord, or a rhythmic pattern detached from a melody, etc.)⁶⁵

A *mnemotypical* fragment of music is a theoretical example of a musical component,⁶⁶ such as a single chord containing perfect fourths, purely in isolation or performed as a standalone chord. Without additional music surrounding that chord, a performer or audience cannot reinterpret a single chord when it is not used in a way that signals a previous piece of music. A *memotypical* fragment of music would be a single interval, rhythmic pattern, or single chord that has the potential to be used as a musical meme by a performer and reinterpreted as such by an audience.⁶⁷ An example of this would be the Tristan chord, which is a tetrachord made of a diminished fourth, major third, and a perfect fourth. (Figure 2.2)



Figure 2.2 *Mnemotype* quartal chord compared to a *memotype* Tristan chord

⁶⁵ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

This specific combination of intervals holds a significant place in music theory and history; even in isolation, this may be interpreted by someone familiar with the chord as a memetic use of the Tristan chord. Jan traces similar musical patterns by Louis Spohr, Franz Liszt, Hector Berlioz, and even Ludwig van Beethoven to demonstrate the memetic progress of this iconic chord.⁶⁸ Inclusive of repertoire and subject matter, a performer may decide to include this in any of Tom Lehrer's ragtime piece "Oedipus Rex" or insert it as a transitional chord after the second verse of his 1954 song "Be Prepared":

"Be prepared, that's the Boy Scout's solemn creed,
Be prepared and be clean in word and deed,
Don't solicit for your sister, that's not nice
(*unless you get a good percentage of her price!*)"⁶⁹

Mnemotypes are small fragments of music that, on their own, do not recall a secondary piece of music as a memetic function, though they can be combined to represent a future meme. Their presence in other pieces may then be viewed as coincidental rather than causal or memetic. On the other hand, *memotypes* are the components of music that are combined to depict a previous piece of music in its most accurate, essential fragment. As Steven Jan defines musical memes and their divided elements, "...the more concise a meme the greater the likelihood that it will survive the trails of replication intact..."⁷⁰

The songs listed in the remainder of this chapter identify material in Tom Lehrer's music that function memetically or germetically. Defining the musical fragments in these songs as memetic or germetic does not define the whole song in the same way. Further, the idea of

⁶⁸ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 150-151. See **Figure 2.2** for a visual reference to the "Tristan chord" memeplex.

⁶⁹ Lehrer and Searle. *Too Many Songs*, 12-13.

⁷⁰ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 34.

memetic and germetic music are not mutually exclusive. It is rather in the definition of how musical memes move between people that concerns the findings in this chapter.⁷¹

Recognizing a musical tune is not so important as to how it is interpreted when it is heard in context. Musical memes, regardless of its relationship to its source material, are formalized and passed on in the minds of the performer and the audience. This is the function of musical memes on display. Tom Lehrer's musical memes use these borrowed excerpts as a musical extension of his lyrics, and tracing these borrowed samples from other historical sources proves the music is acting memetically between composer and audience.

“The Wiener Schnitzel Waltz”

Starting with a musical meme in the introduction, Lehrer paraphrases from the opening motif of *The Blue Danube* by Johann Strauss II. This meme is transposed from the original D major to Ab major and is missing a pickup note. The tempo marking reads *mit Schlag* or “with punch” in direct German translation (**Figure 2.3**), though it would be more accurate to reference recordings to establish a tempo range between 190-197 beats per minute.



Figure 2.3 Memetic introduction of “The Blue Danube” from “The Wiener Schnitzel Waltz”⁷²

As found in the 1981 printed edition, the tempo markings for a large majority of the songs are meant as jokes rather than directives. Other examples include:

⁷¹ Ibid., 72.

⁷² Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 44.

Vernally (referencing the season) for the anti-avian aria “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park”
Torchily, as in holding a torch, for the “realistic” love song “She’s My Girl”
With ease (a pun) to represent the children’s program song “Silent E”
Pornissimo for the bawdy ballad “Smut”
À la Cohan, referencing the songwriter and producer George Cohan, for the ever-hopeful
 “So Long Mom (A Song for World War III)”⁷³

While using original musical content, Lehrer employs a similar style to that of a Viennese waltz, where the chords are tonal and sustained through multiple measures. This allusion of style extends the musical environment established by the opening musical meme. Lehrer’s interlude material between the first A section leading to the B section is steady stream of eighth notes, reminiscent of the passages from a Chopin waltz.

There is a germetic reference that Lehrer writes twice in this song: first, where the first six measures converge with the start of the A section; and second, at the conclusion of the B section. In the latter, the piano part ascends chromatically to arrive at a half-cadence, with all voices ascending in equally creepy, crawling fashion. The second instance is seen in **Figure 2.4**.

⁷³ Ibid., 144.

Figure 2.4 Germetic musical motif by Lehrer, chromatic “arousal”⁷⁴

This reinforces the innuendo of the lyrics without stating explicit material, reminiscent of the bawdy song tradition known as the “teasing song,” where the subject of taboo is very nearly stated before the song form or the lyrics divert abruptly.⁷⁵

An additional example of this in Lehrer’s music would be in the civility-laden song “Smut.” As Lehrer descends into describing different kinds of pornographic material that ought not to be censored by the United States Supreme Court, he descends into a sort of verbose madness while also rising chromatically in the piano part. This tonal rise is a germetic gesture

⁷⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁷⁵ Ed Cray, *The Erotic Muse: American Bawdy Songs* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), 256.

that is both suggestive and narrative, indicative of the age in which the song was written and the emphasis of the male experience, which can influence musical performance and memes.⁷⁶

Interlude

(Spoken) Bring on the obscene movies, murals, postcards, neckties, samplers, stained-glass windows, tattoos, anything! More, more, I'm

poco a poco cresc.

Figure 2.5 Germetic reference, chromatic “arousal” from the song “Smut”⁷⁷

“Alma”

This song is one of the few in Lehrer’s *oeuvre* that has his memetic source material written in the score, a fact of pure convenience rather than enlightenment. In the performance notes, Lehrer’s music states, “Note: the brief musical quotations in the introduction and the three interludes are taken from the works of Gustav Mahler.” (See **Figure 2.6**) Lehrer disclosing his use of musical quotation helps define the memes he uses to create a new meaning in his song.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Michiko Saiki, *The Vocalizing Pianist: Embodying Gendered Performance*. (Bowling Green State University, 2017), 30-32. Saiki deftly describes how phallocentrism influences a musician. A more socially conscious or individually catered analysis of Lehrer’s works may seek to unpack the social implications behind certain memetic and germetic musical gestures between male, female, and nonbinary musicians such as the one listed in Figure 2.5.

⁷⁷ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 103.

⁷⁸ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 47.

Borrowed musical material is not directly quoted in whole sections, but small themes are tied together to create a continuous parody of Mahler's music, which could be considered a quodlibet in terms of musical borrowing.

This song's form is strophic, with four verses and a small ending phrase. The song outlines the lives and loves of Alma Mahler-Werfel, whom Lehrer more accurately describes as "Alma Mahler Gropius Werfel," with a nod to her three marriages to some of Europe's most prominent contributors to culture, architecture, and writing, respectively. In 1940, Alma immigrated to the United States and became a New York socialite until her death in 1964.⁷⁹

Lehrer begins the accompaniment part with the first of three musemes from the works of Gustav Mahler, Alma's first husband. Lehrer paraphrases the opening line sung by the tenor soloist in the third movement of Mahler's 1908-09 opus *Das Lied von der Erde*. (See **Figure 2.4 above**) Lehrer transposes the first three measures down from Bb major to F major, changes the meter from cut time to 2/4 time, and ends the third measure up by a step and a perfect fourth to resolve the melody in creating a dominant seventh chord, which segues into the verses.

Mahler's third movement, "To Youth," is thought of as a kind of scherzo, which is itself a historical dance form which is meant to produce amusement among its participants for its disjunct rhythms and excessively fast tempo. Lehrer's formal strophic form takes the shape of a waltz tempo, though there is an argument to be made that the tempo more closely resembles Mahler's first movement, which has a waltzing theme present throughout.

⁷⁹ Peter Franklin, "Mahler(-Werfel) [née Schindler], Alma Maria." *Grove Music Online*, 2001, accessed February 11, 2025. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000043383>.

[Note: The brief musical quotations in the introduction and the three interludes are taken from the works of Gustav Mahler.]

The image displays a musical score for the third movement of Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*. The top system shows the piano introduction with chords F, G7, and C7. The middle system shows the vocal line with lyrics 'Mit-ten in dem klei-nen Tei-che steht ein Pa-vil-ion aus grü-nem und aus wei-ßem Porzel-lan.' The bottom system shows the piano accompaniment with markings 'saltando' and 'sempre staccato'.

Figure 2.6 Meme #1 compared to *Das Lied von der Erde*, 3rd movement^{80 81}

The second meme attributed in Lehrer's score is from the opening violin statement in the second movement of Mahler's Second Symphony (1888-94) (Figure 2.5). Of his symphonic works, Mahler's Second is one of the most deliberate nods to Beethoven's influence on symphonic and concert music, which can be seen from Mahler's "enormous" fourth movement in the Second Symphony.⁸² The start of the second movement *Adagio moderato* takes the form of

⁸⁰ Tom Lehrer Songs, "Alma."

⁸¹ Gustav Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, (Dover Publications, Inc., 1988), 51.

⁸² Peter Franklin, "Mahler, Gustav." *Grove Music Online*. 2001, accessed February 8, 2025. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000040696>.

a minuet, labeled *grazioso* (gracious) and *nie eilen* (never rushed). Lehrer proceeds to play the melody from its original quarter note=90 to dotted half-note=80, even after shifting from 3/8 to 3/4 time. Lehrer also transposes from Ab major to F major.

The image displays a musical score for the 2nd movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 2. The top system shows a vocal line in F major, with lyrics "Wal - ter and Franz?" and a tempo marking of "C7". The bottom system shows the piano accompaniment, with a tempo marking of "Andante moderato. Sehr gemächlich. Nie eilen." and a tempo marking of "grazioso". The piano part is in 3/4 time, and the tempo is marked "sempre p". The score is labeled "2. Satz" and includes a note: "(Anm. f. d. Dirig.): Alle Betonungen consequent durchführen."

Figure 2.7 Meme #2 from *Symphony No. 2*, 2nd movement^{83 84}

Turning to Lehrer's third memetic reference connects future musicians to the "sacrilegious modernity" of Mahler's Fourth Symphony, meant to serve as a "symphonic 'humoresque'" in form.⁸⁵ If "humoresque" in this instance is taken to mean an accessible large-form work with smaller sections of multiple genres, the second movement holds one such genre of another scherzo, with brass instruments interrupting, "not rushed" and "happy."⁸⁶ (**Figure 2.8**)

⁸³ Tom Lehrer Songs, "Alma."

⁸⁴ Mahler, *Symphony No. 2*, (Universal Edition, 1971), 57.

⁸⁵ Franklin, "Gustav Mahler."

⁸⁶ Ibid.

2 C7 F C7 F

Wal - ter and Franz.

(Symphony No. 4)

1. Cl. in B.

2. 3.

1. Fl.

2. Fl.

1. Bsn.

2. Bsn.

1. Horn in F.

2. Horn in F.

Nicht eilen.

admettend

Etwas gemächlicher.

Figure 2.8 Meme #3 of the clarinet theme in *Symphony No. 4*, 2nd movement^{87 88}

One final meme by Lehrer comes from Mahler's Ninth Symphony (1909-10), another choice from the second movement. The tempo is designated as a "leisurely Ländler," representing a dance type. Another fact from Mahler's manuscript is that this movement was originally titled as a "Scherzo," but it was renamed to describe the dance type instead.⁸⁹ That three of Lehrer's four

⁸⁷ Tom Lehrer Songs, "Alma."

⁸⁸ Mahler, *Symphony No. 4*, (Dover Publications, Inc., 1989), 280.

⁸⁹ Franklin, "Gustav Mahler."

memetic references can also be defined with the words “humoresque” or “scherzo” seems to be, at the very least, a considerable coincidence.

The image displays two musical scores. The top score is a vocal line with lyrics "Wal - ter and Franz." and a melody in G major. Above the staff are the chords C7, F, C7, and F. The bottom score is an orchestral score for the 2nd movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 9, marked "Schwerfällig" (Heavy). It includes staves for Clarinet in B, Bass Clarinet in B, Bassoon, Horn in F, Violin I, Violin II, and Viola. The score features various dynamics (p, pp, f, ff) and articulations (tr, kcsck). A yellow highlight is placed under a specific melodic phrase in the Violin I part, which is a reference to the "Alma" meme.

Figure 2.9 Meme #4 from *Symphony No. 9*, 2nd movement^{90 91}

⁹⁰ Tom Lehrer Songs, “Alma.”

⁹¹ Mahler, *Symphony No. 9*, (Dover Publications, 1993), 59.

“The Wild West is Where I Wanna Be”

John Thomerson has written at length on the borrowing techniques used in relation to musical parody. He even mentions Lehrer’s quotation of the folk song “Home On the Range.”⁹² Further germetic references evoking a “Western” feeling is the piano part’s dotted eighth note patterns in the song’s second half, mimicking a horse cantor. (Figures 2.10 and 2.11)



Figure 2.10 Meme of “Home on the Range” in “The Wild West is Where I Want to Be”



Figure 2.11 Germetic allusion to horse galloping, “The Wild West is Where I Want to Be”⁹³

⁹² Thomerson, *Parody*, 53.

⁹³ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 20.

“Lobachevsky”

Lehrer was deeply influenced by the work of Sylvia Fine and Danny Kaye; in his own words: “Danny Kaye...has been my particular idol since childbirth...”⁹⁴ He recounts from his younger days that he would request to see Kaye’s adaptation of Cole Porter’s *Let’s Face It* in theaters so much that he would come home afterwards to play the melodies by ear and practice these semi-bootlegged songs on his own time.⁹⁵

Lehrer uses quotation and stylistic allusion to parody Kaye and Fine’s bombastic aria on the life and teachings of Russian director Konstantin Stanislavsky by creating a similar song attributed to the life of nineteenth-century mathematician and professor Nikolai Lobachevsky. This tongue-in-cheek tribute references the effects of the practices Stanislavski instituted in his lifetime. The concepts of suffering, empathy, and environment as a process for engaging in character work was a revolutionary approach in the fine arts; this would have been the subject of much debate and conversation in theatrical circles, with whom Fine and Kaye belonged.

There are, on the surface, two issues with comparing Lehrer’s “Lobachevsky” with Fine’s “Stanislavsky” using musical memes. First, there is no extant copy of sheet music for “Lobachevsky,” and a first edition copy or manuscript for “Stanislavsky” is in draft form rather than printed music.⁹⁶ Second, there are no quotations shared between both pieces. However, Jan’s theory of musical memetics accounts for such a discrepancy that can allow borrowed

⁹⁴ Kevin Palmieri, “Lobachevsky,” October 23, 2023, YouTube audio, 13:29-13:43 on Tom Lehrer, *Tom Lehrer Revisited*, Decca Records, 1960. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvwEVLn_778

⁹⁵ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 127.

⁹⁶ Sylvia Fine, *Stanislavsky*. [Place of publication not identified: publisher not identified, date of publication not identified] Notated Music, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2023862364/>.

material to be classified as a musical meme by describing it as a *memplex*,⁹⁷ or a *combination of memes* that is then reinterpreted as a single, larger meme.⁹⁸

In the case of Lehrer vs. Kaye, the comparison between the songs “Stanislavsky” and “Lobachevsky” requires memetic comparison on a secondary level. In this verbal-conceptual tier of understanding the development of musical memes between people,⁹⁹ Lehrer copies Kaye and Fine’s original song, which one can identify as three germetic musical forms:

- 1) Natural minor progressions in the chorus, parodying Russian folk song harmonies.
- 2) Frequent rests/breaks in the music, continuing the parody of Russian folk songs where there are considerable pauses in musical movement.
- 3) Using accompanying chords to dramatize action in the verse lyrics, commenting on Stanislavski’s influence on twentieth-century theater performers.

Lehrer uses these three original writing styles and conglomerates them into a similar style with “Lobachevsky,” including a germetic reference to Liszt’s Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2, which is a memetic reference from early twentieth-century cartoons.¹⁰⁰ This is how musical memes become fecund in practice, where one creator starts a musical idea that borrows from another, and a second iteration of one or multiple musical ideas from that original composition is used in the same style or delivery, producing a similar, if independent, musical meme. By comparison, in “Lobachevsky,” this memplex is made up of three ideas by Fine and Kaye:

⁹⁷ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 102-103.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 71-72.

⁹⁹ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 103.

¹⁰⁰ Goldmark, “Happy Harmonies,” 183-194.

- 1) Lehrer uses the original music by Sylvia Fine to create a memeplex by borrowing original music forms found in Russian folk song idioms. Lehrer uses these idioms memetically to connect to the audiences' association with those concepts.
- 2) Developmental music¹⁰¹, where Lehrer describes the plagiaristic pilgrimage of Lobachevsky's research to the tune of Franz Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2."¹⁰²
- 3) Choreographed breaks in the music, interjecting the same phrase in a caricatured Russian accent, "I am never forget the day..." followed by a lugubrious intermezzo¹⁰³

The germetic music in Fine's "Stanislavsky" then becomes a network of memes (or *memeplex*) by Lehrer's reinterpretation of musical memes through "Lobachevsky." This memeplex highlights technical issues that a musician needs to know to perform this piece.

"O-U (The Hound Song)"

In 1971 Tom Lehrer was commissioned to write music for the children's series *The Electric Company*. Lehrer obliged but, being prone to taking the path of least resistance,¹⁰⁴ was not above using parody, which is the basis for the song "O-U." As the score indicates, the song is a quotation of the aria "Caro Nome" from Giuseppe Verdi's 1851 opera *Rigoletto*.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 206-217. This excerpt outlines the classical music pieces that have become associated with cartoon characters of the twentieth century, from Bugs Bunny to Tom and Jerry. These pieces are not only objects for these protagonists to use, but they in turn are subjects upon which the association of cartoon hijinks may ensue. A debatable point, but an interesting one to note the prevalence of specific composers that seem more "prone" to humorous or memetic treatment than others.

¹⁰² Palmieri, "Lobachevsky," 16:24.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 16:44.

¹⁰⁴ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 147. Nachman recalls a quote from Lehrer on his penchant for never dwelling in his music or his career: "...my songs are very short...I'd rather eat a grape than an apple..."

O-U
(The Hound Song)
 From the Television Show *The Electric Company*
 Words by Tom Lehrer • Music by Giuseppe Verdi ("Caro Nome" from *Rigoletto*)

Allegro moderato (♩ = 76)

Piano

dolciss. *stacc.*

I'm a ve - ry qui - et

Figure 2.12 Opening of Lehrer's "O-U," with reference to Verdi's "Caro Nome"¹⁰⁵

Like "The Elements," Lehrer copying a song is not germetic because he does not use a musical meme from "Caro Nome" within any original music. Instead, parodying "Caro Nome" may be considered memetic in that the aria itself is a memeplex that can be interpreted as a single idea.

In its original context, the technical demands of performing the aria, the composition of the accompaniment, and the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the vocal line all comprise a memeplex (interpreted as a single, larger meme) of what the aria means to its listener. Listening to the aria out of this context brings with it a disjunct set of expectations for audience and performer. The challenge, then, is to demonstrate the meaning behind the music when applied in a different performance space. This is where parody converges with the memetic in performance.

¹⁰⁵ Tom Lehrer Songs, "O-U."

The Holiday Hits- “A Christmas Carol” and “Hanukkah in Santa Monica”

Lehrer’s holiday spirit does not escape his writing inspiration, as he holds two holidays on display in the songs “A Christmas Carol” and “Hanukkah in Santa Monica.” In the former, there are two gestures of which the performer should be aware. First is the memetic use of three Christmas carols by way of Burkholder’s definition of quodlibet.¹⁰⁶ Just over halfway through the song, Lehrer inserts transitional musical material with the Christmas hymns “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen,” and “Angels We Have Heard on High.” All three of these hymn tunes are merged into one medley after Lehrer’s two original verses, sung in immediate succession. The second gesture involves Burkholder’s stylistic allusion,¹⁰⁷ which takes place in at least one area of the song.¹⁰⁸

The music starts off with a jaunty repetitive rhythmic pattern, accented with staccatos. The piano part also starts with both hands above middle C. This registration shift and continuous pattern has the musical potential to imply sleigh bells, possibly accompanied by a rickety old horse and even more rickety, heavily used sleigh. The performer may emphasize this in their piano introduction by either moving faster than the sung melody, or by starting the eighth note rhythms with a slight swing in the beat, only to grow gradually and haphazardly faster through the first verse until the first fermata.

In performing “Hanukkah in Santa Monica,” Lehrer uses a steady eighth note driving force in a 2/4 time signature that resembles a polka mixed with the pop song forms present in seaside resort music, evoking the Santa Monica pier and the feeling of a carnival. More

¹⁰⁶ Sowell, “An Analysis,” 20.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰⁸ Thomerson, “Parody,” 24-26.

stereotypical elements of Jewish culture are on display in recordings than in the score itself, such as in *The Conducted Tom Lehrer* where there are extended highlights given to the orchestration, heavily laden with clarinet solos and melodic harmonizations in continuous thirds.

Performers attempting this piece would also benefit from considering how to portray such a piece against their own membership of a religious or cultural experience.¹⁰⁹ As Lehrer himself states, his own Jewish upbringing had “more to do with the delicatessen than the synagogue...my brother and I went to Sunday School, but we had Christmas trees, and ‘God’ was primarily an expletive, usually preceded by ‘oh’ or ‘my’ or both.” This limited use of specifically memetic material can also be the basis for determining their inclusion into a program, if for no other reason than the season.

“Irish Ballad”

Serious academic studies around the time Lehrer recorded his first album were published under the pursuit of identifying “authenticity” in the folk song style.¹¹⁰ Such endeavors sought to categorize music that was passed on through cultural traditions that transcended musicological methods. Even in categorizing this piece’s memetic references, there is a point of consideration to be made about how to label musical style emulating a broader genre without engaging in stereotype, as the development of the folk song form is connected to the local political and religious history around which it was spread.¹¹¹ In identifying and critically examining Tom

¹⁰⁹ Thomerson, “Parody,” 160-162. Lehrer’s Jewish upbringing influenced some of his writings, from his accents in “Who’s Next?” to referencing anti-Semitic attitudes in “National Brotherhood Week.” Thomerson makes the distinction here that parodists use borrowed black music to position American Jewry as separate from mainstream white culture. These ethnic positions must be understood in the larger history of Jews in America.”

¹¹⁰ Maud Karpeles, “Some Reflections on Authenticity in Folk Music” *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 3 (1951): 10–16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/835763>.

¹¹¹ May McCann, “Music and Politics in Ireland: The Specificity of the Folk Revival in Belfast.” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 4 (1995): 51–75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3060683>.

Lehrer's "Irish Ballad" in written form, musicians of the future can continue to have conversations about memes that speak to cultural norms, standards, or practices. With this context in mind, the performer can then make decisions about how to approach music that may be considered dated, irrelevant, or even controversial.

In his verbal program notes, Tom Lehrer establishes some context for the motivation behind writing a faux Irish ballad. He explains that such music is characterized by being performed on folk instruments (which he does not do), sung with interminable verses (which he claims to truncate), containing an "idiotic refrain" (lasting less than two measures),¹¹² and written in D Aeolian mode. Recordings of Lehrer playing this tune also contain added germetic effects, both through the voice and in accompaniment. Lehrer sings using an exaggerated Gaelic accent, with rhotic [r] sounds, elided [eɪ] diphthongs replaced with [ɛ] vowels, and the replacement of certain [aɪ] diphthongs with [ɔɪ], on words like "by" and "lying" or "died."¹¹³ After just two of the eight printed verses, Lehrer embellishes the piano part with arpeggiated chords and chromatic grace note figures one verse at a time. These pianistic techniques could be interpreted as a development of the original memes that resemble an Irish folk song.

2.3 The Limits of Fecundity: Acknowledging Cultural Dating

When considering practicing, performing, and programming comedy songs (within which Lehrer's songs are included), a performer should be aware of three factors of interpretation:

¹¹² The Tom Lehrer Wisdom Channel, "The Irish Ballad," YouTube, October 16, 2012, YouTube video, 0:14-0:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47bKTtIwrO4>.

¹¹³ Ibid., 1:53-2:58.

- 1) The music can provide further conversation beyond music theory.¹¹⁴
- 2) Parody is a compositional device that allows for meaning beyond humor.¹¹⁵
- 3) Lehrer's place in musical history is relatively fixed, and contextualizing his music should only continue so long as his music and lyrics remain relevant to further conversation, much like contextualizing the prevalence of musemes.

Just as songs can reflect social change,¹¹⁶ music has been used for other social conversations, from acting as a vehicle for expressing the inexpressible¹¹⁷ to even furthering stereotypes and espousing hatred from social groups.¹¹⁸

Humor as a tool of communication requires a degree of context to make it comprehensible,¹¹⁹ even if music is the medium through which humor is expressed. The period in which a musician performs or writes can be informed by the three points listed above; Lehrer's music is infused with similar cultural and historical events. Lehrer's prime compositional period was between 1945 and 1965 or, in his own words:

"Thirty-seven songs in twenty years is hardly what I could call a career...if I got an idea for a song I would write it and if I didn't get an idea I wouldn't write it. But it wouldn't bother me, I wouldn't consider it writer's block..."¹²⁰

¹¹⁴ Cassandra I. Carr, "Charles Ives's Humor as Reflected in His Songs," *American Music* 7, no. 2 (1989): 123–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3052199>.

¹¹⁵ Thomerson, "Parody," 13-15.

¹¹⁶ Brad Schreiber, *Music is Power: Popular Songs, Social Justice, and the Will to Change*. (Rutgers University Press, 2023), 2-3. Schreiber mentions the Madison, WI duo The Prince Myshkins as an example of musicians making social commentary without pomp, circumstance, or extensive celebrity.

¹¹⁷ Cray, *The Erotic Muse*, 256.

¹¹⁸ Dick Weissman, *Talkin' 'bout a Revolution: Music and Social Change in America*. (Backbeat Books, 2010), 295.

¹¹⁹ Burrell, Jalylah. "Capacity for Laughter: Toward a Black Feminist Theory of Humor." (PhD diss., Yale University, 2017), 195, ProQuest (10631567).

¹²⁰ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 139.

Recalling the time frame of Lehrer's compositional heyday is something of note. In post-World War II American life, the civil rights movement was in its earlier iterations, and its impact on cultural ideals started expanding nationwide throughout the 1950s and 60s as media outlets also modernized and expanded.

This led to some progress and change while it also led to inadvertent regressions or diminishments. One such instance of this evolution for listeners was the development of the Long Play (LP) album.¹²¹ Lehrer's 1953 debut album fell into this new category of record as a new and accessible form of addressing social issues in a performer's comedy or speech album. While LP records increased songs and albums to a wider range of audiences, this tended to promote white artists more than audiences of color, and this limitation on the LPs cultural consumption made its impression. Listening to Lehrer's music through this lens of academic scrutiny allows students to have meaningful conversations around the limitations of modern technology and musical consumption, which in turn influences how many different musical memes to which one is exposed. Listening to LP records with this degree of separation also allows for more opinions to critically examine comedy songs.¹²²

In a 1979 interview with Jay Baltazar for National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* program, Lehrer recalled his teaching and performance career as he encapsulated what he thought made his songs memorable or engaging. Excerpted from these remarks, Lehrer speaks

¹²¹ Justin T. Lorts, "Black Laughter /Black Protest: Civil Rights, Respectability, and the Cultural Politics of African American Comedy, 1934–1968." (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2008), 140-141, ProQuest (3349917). Future discussion and scholastic inquiry could include the cultural and socioeconomic results of new music technologies on memetic understanding. Lorts' dissertation is a good example of twentieth century history and context here.

¹²² Burrell, "Capacity for Laughter," 175.

on the idea of how long-lasting or meaningful the jokes and pop culture references present in his music are for his audience. In reference to the George and Ira Gershwin musical *Of Thee I Sing*:

“...I think that [the] specific [pop culture] references [in *Of Thee I Sing*] aren’t as important...the references there are definitely dated...it has to do with 1931...once you get those small references cleared out, you can get the joke, and I think the same thing might be true [of Lehrer’s own works] ...”¹²³

Lehrer also admits that he never expected his records to be, and stay, so popular:

“...the type of humor I would have thought would have been dated is what surprises me...the level of humor [in the songs on his 1953 album] was what used to be called ‘sophomoric’... kind of college humor, you know, just making fun of anything...”

“...what has amazed me is the fact that it’s selling at all now after all these years, that some of these dated references I’m sure the people who are buying the records now have no idea what it means, but that doesn’t matter. I suppose [it’s] like Shakespeare; you don’t have to understand what every word means but you get the whole [idea]...I like to compare myself to Shakespeare [that way]...”¹²⁴

The goal of this chapter is to “get those small references cleared out” by identifying some of the musical, lyrical, and historical points that made for humorous effect in Lehrer’s works.

“I Wanna Go Back to Dixie”

The copyright on Lehrer’s printed version of his song “I Wanna Go Back to Dixie” is listed variously as 1953 and 1954. This time frame coincides with the final arguments of the U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, with its final decision being rendered May 12th, 1954. Though it may not be said this court decision directly inspired Lehrer to write this song, the proximity of time between the decision and his performances would indicate he was, at the very least, aware of the proceedings and the conversations surrounding its potential future implications on educational systems in the country.

¹²³ @Steelbeard1, “Tom Lehrer Interview NPR” interviewed by Jay Balthazar, *All Things Considered*, NPR, January 4, 1979, YouTube audio/video, 7:41-8:10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrhJz2TRUgc>.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:11-8:57.

The song reflects a Southern ballad, similar in style to pieces performed in minstrelsy acts and vaudeville circuits.¹²⁵ From his own composer's notes, Lehrer simply states: "Here we have a typical Dixie song, all about the many delightful features of the South."¹²⁶ The word "delightful" is highlighted here to illustrate both an authentic and a sarcastic commentary on the cultural and legal attitudes of the American South at the time. Even if used ironically, the subject matter contained in the remainder of this chapter will discuss material that may be considered by some readers as uncomfortable. As Dick Weissman remarks: "...ignorance [of songs describing prejudice against a group of people] ...is not a solution to the sentiments that govern them..."¹²⁷

The rest of this section will outline some of the satirical points Lehrer alludes to in his music and in his lyrics.¹²⁸ Including musical memes with this commentary gives an additional dimension to the meaning behind performing this song for future audiences. Lehrer uses genuine references to the appeal of Southern cooking and natural elements like jasmine or honeysuckle. He also uses satire and shock value to explicitly highlight the significant and draconian legal measures inflicted on fellow American citizens at the time, from mentioning class structural differences (**See Figure 2.17 below referencing domestic labor stereotypically addressed to formerly enslaved women**) to addressing discriminatory legal practices (**See Figure 2.14 below referencing "poll tax" policies**) to even going so far as to addressing the inhumane and

¹²⁵ Leah Kathleen Cothorn, "The Coon Song: A study of American music, entertainment, and racism" (MA thesis, University of Oregon, 1990) 49-51, ProQuest (1342336).

¹²⁶ Hansen, *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*, 33.

¹²⁷ Weissman, *Talkin' 'bout a Revolution*, 295.

¹²⁸ Thomerson, "Parody," 58. Thomerson provides a partial but equally compelling description of Lehrer's parodic use of "Dixie." This is used to humorous effect, and this section continues what Thomerson mentions here.

barbarous practice of lynching by ironically suggesting it is an inimitable attribute of Southern life. (See **Figure 2.15 below referencing lynching**)

Lehrer uses direct parody on multiple occasions and in more than one version of this song's lyrics and recordings. To start, Lehrer uses a signature technique where he recites a meme in his piano opening; this piece depicts Daniel Decatur Emmett's 1859 tune "Dixie," which was the *de facto* anthem of the secessionist states during the American Civil War. (**Figure 2.13**)

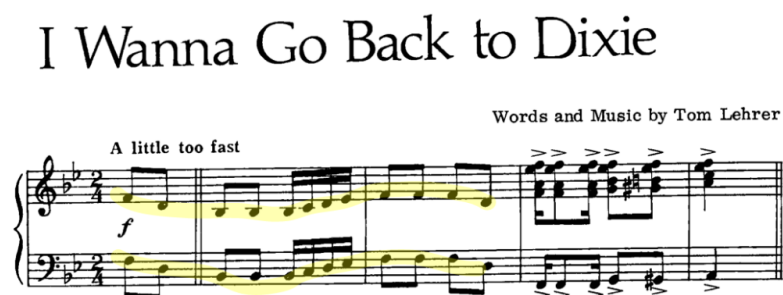


Figure 2.13 Memetic anthem of "Dixie"¹²⁹

In two different versions of the song, four other tunes are quoted or referenced as a memetic continuation of the "minstrel" song form, only Lehrer uses these tunes to support his lyrics. What this music portrays is at the discretion of the performer to recreate.

In *Songs by Tom Lehrer*, the recording of "I Wanna Go Back to Dixie" contains one phrase not included in the sheet music. That phrase is an extract of the chorus to the 1919 song "Swanee" by George Gershwin and Irving Caesar (See **Figure 2.14 below**).

¹²⁹ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 24.

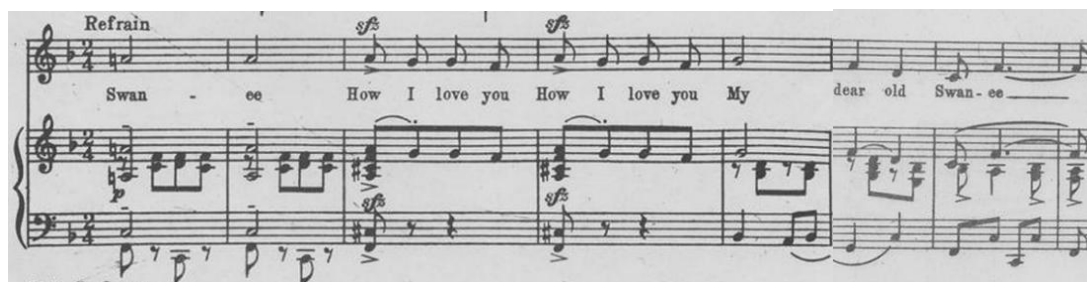


Figure 2.14 “Swanee” by Gershwin & Caesar. Source material of Lehrer’s meme¹³⁰

Further, the first-verse lyrics that mention “...waitin’ for the Robert E. Lee (it was never there on time)...” is more of a germetic reference to the 1912 song “Waiting for the Robert E. Lee,” which Jolson also made popular in a cover from 1947. (**Figure 2.15**) Lyric analysis would be required to consider how closely these lyrics resemble the original, but the musical and lyric inclusion together suggests the reference is a meme. Lehrer uses distinct but similar accompanying figures and melodic cadence to recall Jolson’s rendition of the song.



Figure 2.15 Germetic music referencing “Waiting for the Robert E. Lee”¹³¹

The third memetic reference is in the revised version of the lyrics but was never recorded (see **Figure 2.16**). Compared to the original recording, this new set of lyrics inserts new lyrics found at the end of the A section of the piece while also replacing the Jolson quotation of “Swanee”

¹³⁰ George Gershwin, Irving Caesar, and Al Jolson. "Swanee" (1919), *Vocal Popular Sheet Music Collection*. Score 1540.

¹³¹ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 24.

with a quatrain sung to the tune of “In the Evening by the Moonlight” by African American minstrel composer James Bland:

I WANNA GO BACK TO DIXIE (revised)

words and music by Tom Lehrer

I wanna go back to Dixie,
Take me back to dear old Dixie,
That's the only li'l ol' place for li'l ol' me.
Old times there are not forgotten,
Whuppin' slaves and sellin' cotton,
And waitin' for the Robert E. Lee
(It was never there on time).

I'll go back to the Swanee,
Where pellagra makes you scrawny,
And the jasmine and the tear gas smell jes' fine.
I really am a-fixin'
To go back where there's no mixin',
Down below that Mason-Dixon line.

To the tune of “In the Evening by the Moonlight”
In the evening by the moonlight
You can sit till you git sleepy
Or go huntin' in the moonlight
For the N-double-A-C-P

Figure 2.16 Alternative memetic lyrics between sections of “I Wanna Go Back to Dixie”¹³²

The image shows a musical score for the song "I Wanna Go Back to Dixie". It consists of two systems of music. The first system has a treble and bass staff with piano accompaniment. The lyrics are "low that Ma - son - Dix - on line." followed by a yellow box containing "(Spoken) Won't - cha". The second system continues the melody with lyrics "come with me to Al - a - bam - my. Back to the arms of my dear ol' Mam - my, Her". Chord symbols like C7, F7, Bb, Eb, and Eb7 are written above the staff.

Figure 2.17 Memetic gap in “I Wanna Go Back to Dixie”¹³³

¹³² Tom Lehrer Songs, “I Wanna Go Back to Dixie,” song list containing alternative lyrics

¹³³ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 26. Recordings contain “Swanee” or “In the Evening by the Moonlight.”

Finally, the fourth memetic reference is written in the score and lyrics. This is toward the end of the song, a quotation from John Howard Payne's "Home! Sweet Home!"¹³⁴

Original Payne lyrics:

"Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home"

Lehrer's tag:

"Be it ever so decadent, there's no place like home"

Throughout the song, Lehrer uses African American Vernacular English, albeit inconsistently, in his lyrics and in his vocal performance. This style of writing was a defining characteristic of nineteenth century minstrel songs. Such lyrics included but was not limited to: truncating or abbreviating present participle verbs; phonetic or slang spelling of articles and adverbs; and rhyming schemes that highlight differences in dialect, regionalism, or socioeconomic/racial background (See **Figure 2.17 above as example**). Though more thorough and intellectually reciprocal conversations can be found elsewhere regarding the use of African American Vernacular English in spoken and musical word, it is this specific use of such language and grammar in the context of minstrel shows that are on display in "I Wanna Go Back to Dixie."

The implication behind such lyrics during the nineteenth century was to highlight an oversimplified, stereotypical mannerism of enslaved peoples and poor, mainly British, immigrants living in the pre-Civil War South.¹³⁵ In "I Wanna Go Back to Dixie," this use of text and song references evokes a style like a minstrel song. Lehrer, however, diverts from this by explicitly *including* subjects relevant to audiences, from discriminatory voting practices to mentioning lynchings and the Ku Klux Klan.

¹³⁴ Thomerson, "Parody," 57.

¹³⁵ Lorts, "Black Laughter /Black Protest," 13.

Lehrer seems to recognize the relevance of his lyrics, as his performance of this piece changes over time. From his original 1953 recording, excerpted lyrics appear as:

[end of A section]
 "...I wanna go back to the Swanee
 where pellagra makes you scrawny,
 and the honeysuckle clutters up the vine.
 I really am a fixin'
 to go home and start a-mixin'
 down below that Mason-Dixon line..."

[Start of second verse]
 "I wanna go back to Dixie,
 I wanna be a Dixie pixie
 and eat cornpone till it's comin' out of my ears..."¹³⁶

whereas in the 1967 recording "Tom Lehrer: Live in Copenhagen," Lehrer revises these lines:

[end of A section]
 "...I wanna go back to the Swanee
 where pellagra makes you scrawny,
 and the jasmine and the tear gas smell just fine.
 I really am a fixin'
 to go back where there's no mixin'
 down below that Mason-Dixon line..."

[Start of second verse]
 "I wanna start relaxin'
down in Birmingham or Jackson,
 when we're havin' fun, why no one interferes..."¹³⁷

In the second verse from 1967, Lehrer references Birmingham, Alabama and Jackson, Mississippi in what could be multiple instances of events that may have been familiar to international audiences. Options include the 1963 Birmingham campaign of federal troops

¹³⁶ Tom Lehrer- Topic, "I Wanna Go Back to Dixie," November 7, 2023, YouTube video, 0:22-1:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzvXuUBovBs>.

¹³⁷ The Tom Lehrer Wisdom Channel, "I Wanna Go Back to Dixie" YouTube, 0:38-1:19 on Tom Lehrer, *Tom Lehrer: Live in Copenhagen*, 1967.

occupying public streets or the Jackson, Mississippi events in 1965 leading to nearly 1000 arrests of peaceful protesters around the time of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1965.

Without endorsing the song, I submit that “I Wanna Go Back to Dixie” takes a measured critique of the culture of the American South in the 1950s and 1960s. The song does this while also engaging with some of the discomfiting features of the songs that made music a medium of racist ideologies and attitudes.¹³⁸ This suggests that Lehrer’s music operates memetically more so than just parodically or humorously because the intended messaging behind the borrowed music operates based on the audience’s implied understanding of the tunes “Swanee” and “Dixie.”

For the twenty-first century musician, satire can be seen as one writing device used in what Jalylah Burrell describes as “American comedic traditions.”¹³⁹ These traditions carry with them similar devices of innuendo, stereotyping, and dismissive remarks that pose a risk of perpetuating cultural inequities more than they do breaking or ridiculing them.¹⁴⁰ If satire is meant to “defy the status quo,”¹⁴¹ then its function in musical comedy would be reflected either in lyrics that addresses disparities of authority or in the construction of the music that is incongruent to its lyrics.¹⁴² In both instances, satire relies on the previous knowledge and experiences of its audience, and musical memetics is a way to identify such previous knowledge.

¹³⁸ Thomerson, “Parody,” 134-135. Lehrer coupled music and parody to highlight distinctions and toe the line between the tensions present in American culture, from religious to cultural and socioeconomic factors.

¹³⁹ Burrell, “Capacity for Laughter,” 121-126.

¹⁴⁰ Samantha Mowery, “Stephen Foster and American Song,” 10-12, (DMA diss., The Ohio State University, 2008) ProQuest (3346606).

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 180.

¹⁴² Randall Wayne Hollingsworth, “Rhetoric of the Novelty Song: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of the Humorous Works of Ray Stevens.” (PhD diss., The Florida State University, 1997), 22, ProQuest (9813690).

As humor changes, so too do the memetic references to it, as musemes are the musical equivalent of ideas spread between people. John Thomerson makes the same distinction:

“...each parody could potentially be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on a listener’s stylistic competency and their familiarity with the parodist’s borrowed music or targeted conventions...”¹⁴³

If the intended joke and subsequent musical memes that signify them serves more of a perpetuation of stereotypes, then this would be worth considering in performing or programming music in future. Similar scrutiny can be applied to Lehrer’s music and also to other composers who use musical memes and germetic musical devices to further divisive cultural attitudes.

Such is the means of cultural evolution- time will tell how many of Lehrer’s songs will remain relevant against the backdrop of history and contemporary issues.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps the greatest paradox is knowing that Lehrer’s music can only remain prescient in politically volatile and culturally divisive times if the same issues present in his songs persist. This is a discussion for students, teachers, and audiences as they begin to study and perform musical memes.

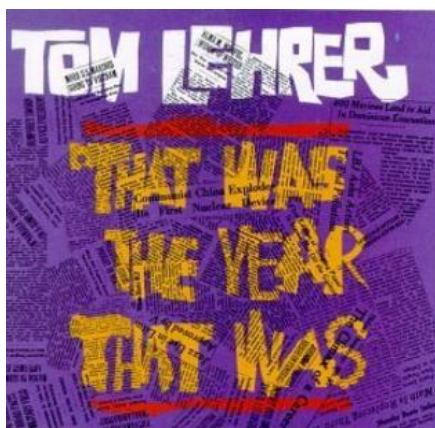


Figure 2.18 Cover art for Lehrer’s 1965 Gold-Record LP “That Was the Year That Was”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Thomerson, “Parody,” 35.

¹⁴⁴ Burrell, “Capacity for Laughter,” 177-180.

¹⁴⁵ Hansen, *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*, 79.

Chapter 3: Rehearsing and Learning Tom Lehrer's Music

“Plagiarize, plagiarize, plagiarize, only be sure always to call it please, ‘research.’”
- “Lobachevsky,” *Songs by Tom Lehrer*, 1953

3.1 Introduction to Technical Issues

The previous chapter covered how to define and source the memes in Tom Lehrer's music. In practice, three technical issues arise when rehearsing and learning Lehrer's music with respect to successfully delivering the musical and lyrical memetic and germetic material contained therein: issues as a singer, issues as a pianist, and issues as a singer-pianist. The chapter is divided accordingly.

Tom Lehrer was a one-man show, acting as his own singer, songwriter and accompanist. He also wrote interstitial material with castaway lines that would be the envy of any stand-up set:

“This year...on the first day [of National Brotherhood Week], Malcolm X was killed, which gives you an idea of how effective the whole thing is.”¹⁴⁶

“Base-8 [in mathematics] is just like base-10, if you're missing two fingers.”¹⁴⁷

“I really *enjoy* having my prurient interests aroused and, in fact, there's only one thing I enjoy more than having them *aroused* and that is having them *gratified*.”

“As you know, audience participation is an important part of public folk singing, so if any of you feel like joining in on this song, I would appreciate it if you would *get out*.”¹⁴⁸

Lehrer's multifaceted roles in his recitals add a layer of complexity to a performance guide that would otherwise be rather routine. Reviewing musical scores and deciding how to perform its writing is one task as a singer, another as a pianist, and yet another as a singer-pianist. Research

¹⁴⁶ “National Brotherhood Week,” 0:29-0:39 on Tom Lehrer, *That Was the Year that Was*, Reprise Records, 1965.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., “New Math,” 24:08-24:17.

¹⁴⁸ The Tom Lehrer Wisdom Channel, “The Irish Ballad,” 0:50-1:02.

on the latter subject is growing but limited in a formal academic setting. This chapter will synthesize various sources of information on effective vocal delivery for the humorous singer. In addition, this chapter will outline a selection of methods relating to piano pedagogy, from developing students' skills in reading popular music melodies¹⁴⁹ to recommendations for current piano curricula¹⁵⁰ and comparing the difficulties of being a self-accompanying singer.¹⁵¹

3.2 Issues as a Singer

To make an audience laugh, one must break expectations and adapt to circumstances.¹⁵² This requires a singer to have multiple avenues of vocal expression, text delivery, and score analysis available to them in rehearsal settings. From the perspective of vocal pedagogy, singing Tom Lehrer's songs requires an understanding that vocal techniques extend beyond classical training. For a singer, this requires critically examining Lehrer's vocal approach to his songs by interpreting what he is doing in his attempt to elicit laughter. With this type of analysis, singers can more specifically identify Lehrer's vocal antics and apply them in their own interpretations.

Technical issues arise for a singer when making logistic and interpretive decisions to perform Lehrer's songs. The first issue comes from choosing to self-accompany or to sing with a

¹⁴⁹ Katherine Rose Acone, "Popular Music and Piano Pedagogy: Case Studies in Individual Instruction" (DMA diss., University of Toronto, 2023), 67, ProQuest (30639643).

¹⁵⁰ Melissa Maccarelli Slawsky, "Transitioning from Student to Teacher in the Master-Apprentice Model of Piano Pedagogy: An Exploratory Study of Challenges, Solutions, Resources, Reflections, and Suggestions for the Future" (PhD diss., University of South Florida, 2011), 185, ProQuest (3464639).

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Pearse, "Because There is No Basis for Comparison": The Self-Accompanying Singer and Roger Reynolds' Sketchbook for the Unbearable Lightness of Being" (DMA diss., Bowling Green State University, 2018), 7, ProQuest (13819342).

¹⁵² Allesandro Valiante, "Can Stand-Up Comedy be Used to Improve Classroom Management? An in-Depth Examination and Comparative Analysis of Stand-Up Comedy and Classroom Management Practices," (MA thesis, McGill University, 2021), 53-58, ProQuest (29043201). A parallel performance practice is arguably found in the connection between comedians and other fields, including education. Valiante expertly describes such a process.

separate accompanist. Singing directly from the piano would require the performer to rehearse singing from a sedentary position, which may change breathing patterns and timing. If the singer also wishes to use a microphone, they will need to rehearse with the microphone at different positions and levels against their own location at the piano. This, in turn, creates issues with respect to the angle of the face and direction of the vocal delivery on a visual level. Students can rehearse this individually to determine comfort level when positioned at the piano before consulting with an instructor about microphones positioned for an audience to see the performer.

From a performance perspective, general challenges exist for a singer to adequately sing a given melody and present it in a way that signals their understanding and confidence to lead an audience through a comedic experience.¹⁵³ Regardless of delivery, timing, and coordination, the technical aspects of tessitura and healthy delivery is worth considering, especially in instances where Lehrer's music is written as more overt parody rather than memetic referencing. Ironically, to successfully perform comedy songs in an academic setting, they must be learned, rehearsed, and performed with the same discipline as any other piece of music.

Tom Lehrer's vocal range as presented in his songs extends from F2 up to F4, a two-octave range. While this would describe an average vocal range for a baritone voice,¹⁵⁴ the difference between his total range and the tessitura present in most of his songs leaves a window of notes that are only used on a limited basis. This is both for pedagogical reasons and for the use of humor for specific pieces. In the song from 1958 entitled "We Will All Go Together When We Go," Lehrer's music ends on a rapid scalar descent from D4 to F2, the lowest note in his works.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 71-73. Creating a positive environment where an audience (in Valiante's case, students) can engage may prove beneficial to leaders in any humanities field.

¹⁵⁴ Scott McCoy, *Your Voice: An Inside View*, (An Inside View Press, 2019), 44-47.



Figure 3.1 Obscene registration shifts, “We Will All Go Together When We Go”¹⁵⁵

A singer who has rehearsed and researched this song will note that Lehrer sings this low F not with a balanced vocal delivery, but with a mixture of vocal fry and underpressurized vocal closure. Attempting to sing this last line with a consistent timbre would not only be counterproductive, but it would also be counter to the intended effect brought about by Lehrer’s writing and performing of the song.

The effect produces a feeling that the note is slightly beyond Lehrer’s vocal abilities, and this pairs with the music’s concluding message about the threat of nuclear proliferation and the almost unutterably low range to which that message descends after the rousing, “moderately bright” tune that preceded it. The descending line mimics the same downward trajectory as a nuclear missile, but the result is a poorly executed low note rather than mutual annihilation. It certainly takes the idea of “bombing” onstage to a completely new level.

Addressing and counteracting this example would be in determining where to place this song in a program. The singer must be able to sing something at least close to this note, but if the intent is to follow Lehrer’s vocal style, a singer would need to produce similar vocal emissions as Lehrer does. This also requires an understanding of one’s own vocal range and ability before or after a set amount of active performance time to deliver it with its intended ironic effect. For

¹⁵⁵ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 87.

higher voice types like baritones or mezzo-sopranos, singing a note in the lower extension of their register would be an appropriate end to a recital set in the first half of the program.

In highlighting the absurdity of this interval encompassing a thirteenth, Lehrer sings the final words “when we go” with a more exaggerated oral posture.¹⁵⁶ By slightly over compressing his vocal cords and shaping his lip position to a fully rounded [o] sound while elongating his jaw position to an [ɔ] vowel, Lehrer diverts from his standard vocal delivery to present a more strained, overworked vocal style. Listening to the recordings and practicing this in advance will allow students to have a physical example of a range of notes that are affected by internal forces from one’s own physical anatomy.

Another question emerges for future musicians, namely in how they understand vocal technique against the sounds of Lehrer’s songs found in his recordings. Lehrer uses his voice to convey humor and tone by using different vocal techniques, including: extreme registration shifts to signal an extreme change of thought;¹⁵⁷ over-articulated ending consonants and shadow vowels to illuminate internal rhymes¹⁵⁸ portamento and non-legato singing to approximate a sung melody;¹⁵⁹ nasal sounds and laryngeal constriction to display infantile thinking;¹⁶⁰ hypersibilant [s] sounds to allude to a specific type of frivolousness;¹⁶¹ breathy vocal production to convey

¹⁵⁶ The Tom Lehrer Wisdom Channel, “We Will All Go Together when We Go,” March 20, 2008, YouTube video, 2:50-3:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frAEmhqDLFs>.

¹⁵⁷ Tom Lehrer Songs, “It Makes a Fellow Proud to Be a Soldier.”

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., “The Hunting Song.”

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., “The Masochism Tango.”

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., “The Folk Song Army.”

¹⁶¹ Ibid., “Be Prepared.”

weakness or fatigue;¹⁶² and vocal growls and vocal fry to express derision, annoyance, or embarrassment from a character.¹⁶³ If a singer can portray multiple characters with Franz Schubert's three-charactered epic *lied* "Erlkönig," similar methods can apply to Tom Lehrer's songs to successfully produce comedic effect.

If a singer wanted to utilize these vocal techniques to convey something they found funny, they would need to demonstrate the difference between their standard practices and some of these additional techniques. The physical sensation of creating "funny" sounds requires some desensitization,¹⁶⁴ so dedicated practice sessions would help a future student to sing without making mistakes due to their own reaction to the jokes they are presenting.¹⁶⁵

Another point of consideration in performing Lehrer's songs is deciding on an overall presentation of vocal style. This can most directly be applied to the most memetic references and parodies in his works. As one example, classical vocal technique of a piece of music would be defined by its unison between registrations, accurate rendering of the written melody, and a consistent legato tone against equally pronounced words.¹⁶⁶ By contrast, popular song vocal technique holds different requirements, including a more clearly defined yet equally fundamental division of vocal registers.

¹⁶² Ibid., "When You Are Old and Grey."

¹⁶³ Ibid., "Oedipus Rex."

¹⁶⁴ Jon Nix, "'You Want Me to Do *What?*': Twenty-First-Century Voice Pedagogy Encounters Pedagogical Fundamentalism." *The Choral Journal* 53, no. 10 (2013): 43–51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43051711>.

¹⁶⁵ Valiante, "Can Stand-Up," 83-88. Valiante cogently claims that encouraging dialogue between stand-up comedians and their audience relates to the field of education. The voice studio may apply similar practices when leading any masterclasses or group work relating to comedy songs.

¹⁶⁶ McCoy, *Your Voice*, 159-162.

To rehearse this skill of vocal style, a singer would need to understand both the melody as it has been realized in any existing musical scores and background knowledge of recordings as Lehrer performed those same melodies. From there, a singer can practice singing the written melody to pitch and rhythmic accuracy. As one example, in his animal rights song “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park,”¹⁶⁷ Lehrer’s written melody is dictated in a waltz tempo (**Figure 3.2**), with specific indications for a sung and spoken melody:

The image shows a musical score for the song "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park." The score is written for piano and voice. The piano part consists of two staves. The voice part is written on a single staff. The lyrics are: "I think the love - li - est time of the year is the spring. I do, don't you? Course you do!" The score includes chord markings: Dm7, G7, C, G7, C, (Spoken), A7, D7, and G7. The tempo is marked as waltz. The score includes a "poco rit." marking. The spoken part is indicated by a yellow highlight and the word "(Spoken)".

Figure 3.2 “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park,” sung and spoken vocal inflection options¹⁶⁸

After about two weeks of dedicated practice to comfortably sing the melody, this can then be embellished to follow more of Lehrer’s vocal inflections, which focus less on the full value of certain notes to follow a more vocally flexible style. As illustrated in Figure 3.2, the spoken part is indicated, but this single instance of the music indicating a spoken part should not limit a singer’s ability to navigate between a spoken and a sung delivery when singing Lehrer’s songs in general. In addition to reading Lehrer’s musical score to interpret sung delivery, singers can listen to Lehrer’s recordings and observe when he switches from a sung to a half-spoken delivery. The spoken markings could suggest that, if replaced with sung note-heads, the same

¹⁶⁷ Hansen, *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*, 36.

¹⁶⁸ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 50-51.

notes could be sung in equal strength. Conversely, this reading of the musical score should not bind the future singer from strictly adhering to marking the difference between both styles.

In this instance, performing Lehrer's songs with accuracy to the written score would be equally valid on a technical level; whether this vocal delivery conveys a joke to equal effect for the audience would be another endeavor. A singer could make some smaller adjustments to their technical delivery to more accurately reflect the setup or completion of a joke, such as the one from Figure 3.2, with Lehrer's considerate question of agreeing about the beauty of spring is rushed through to force the audience to agree with a wry, "of *course* you do!" One could just as deliberately converge both styles by singing the beginning of the spoken part on the indicated pitch or by truncating the last sung note to sound more spoken. This is one such example of how to address issues present in Lehrer's musical score that could be answered by both referencing his original performance standard and by interpreting the score to transition between different vocal styles with ease.

In the case of both "O-U" and "The Elements," these songs are copied in their entirety. Future musicians must decide how to most easily and efficiently navigate the vocal demands of a previous piece set to Lehrer's lyrics or reworked melodic arrangements. This is necessary not just for a singer's vocal health and ability, but for artistic purposes as well. In addition to a sustainable vocal approach, adequately delivering music in a way that is deemed funny by an audience requires practice, feedback from peers or faculty, and adjustments to style.

Considering "The Elements," the oscillating stepwise motion in the melody indicates a "strong-weak" or "antecedent-consequent" rhythmic progression. The original Gilbert & Sullivan lyrics pair with this musical rhythm. What is not guaranteed is Lehrer's attempt at

fitting the names of the chemical elements to those same rhythmic constraints.¹⁶⁹ The singer must reconcile the vocal demands of accurately singing the melody against the demands of accurately naming the chemical elements. This challenge would require a singer to test their ability to sing the song in multiple ways to determine which vocal technique works for them.

If one were to sing the song in a dry, spoken recitation of the elements, this would satisfy Lehrer's tempo marking for the song to be performed "as fast as possible," though this may come at the expense of the vocal line, reducing the impact of the musical meme present in the song.¹⁷⁰ Copying-fidelity as an essential component of musical memetics requires a faithful rendition of a portion of previous musical material. In this instance, the entirety of the "Major General's Song" is quoted. The difficulty in singing the musical memes of the song requires from its performer a faithful copy of at least a single fragment of a melody.¹⁷¹

Defining a musical meme by its ability to function as copy-fidelity of previously borrowed musical material extends beyond Tom Lehrer's works. Another example of a parody song comes from the British duo Michael Flanders and Donald Swann, collectively known as Flanders & Swann. They set an excerpt of the third movement of Mozart's Horn Concerto No. 4 in E-flat Major, K. 495 to lyrics about an aspiring horn player who misplaces their instrument.¹⁷² The memetic reference is placed on the recognition of the opening phrase of the sonata-allegro

¹⁶⁹ The Tom Lehrer Wisdom Channel, "The Elements," 1:08. Student singers may also note the mispronunciation of the elements "mercury" to "mercunry" and "dysprosium" to "dyscosium" before and after the element "molybdenum" is pronounced with a vowel elision on the first syllable. It is possible to sing even if you flub words!

¹⁷⁰ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 47.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁷² Michael Flanders and Donald Swann, *The Songs of Michael Flanders & Donald Swann* (St. Martin's Press, 1977), 103-113.

form, the listener's ability to hear or decipher Mozartian harmonic progressions, and the perception of the French horn melody as performed on an other-than-French-horn instrument.

In this event, humor is derived from the faithful rendition of the opening melody as performed by a foreign instrument. Such detailed articulation and non-legato singing is anachronous to a classical style of singing. This melody as presented in an abnormal instrument is finished by an octave drop from E-flat-3 down to E-flat-2, a considerable drop in range for any bass-voiced singer. (**Figure 3.3**)

Allegro vivace ♩. = 132

mf

I once had a whim and I had to o-bey it To buy a French Horn in a

p

sec-ond-hand shop; I po-lished it up and I star-ted to play it In spite of the neigh-bours who

begged me to stop.

f

Figure 3.3 Memetic quotation of Mozart K. 495 “Ill Wind,” Flanders & Swann¹⁷³

The more incoherent the final note in this opening is sung, the more indicative that this tune is perhaps considered out of the range of comfortability for the singer to adequately perform what is considered a staple of the French horn repertoire. The challenge presented for the singer

¹⁷³ Flanders and Swann, *The Songs of*, 105.

is to decide whether to perform with a more classical vocal technique or to abandon this technique to embody the melody as it is typically understood on another instrument. Even if a singer is already predisposed to sound like one, impersonating a French horn with the human voice requires a conscious effort to practice. Setting out to sing borrowed music, whether by Flanders & Swann or Tom Lehrer, requires such reflection from the performer as they practice.

Yet another technical difficulty in Lehrer's music is the quantity of lyric content compared to the limits of the musical phrases he writes, henceforth described as "too many words, not enough air." There are multiple instances of Lehrer's songs requiring a considerable amount of consistent air supply to maintain some of his song's extensive patter, short transition time, and adding to the physicality of the singing endeavor with any self-accompanying gestures.

One example of this difficulty arises with Lehrer's biting march, "So Long, Mom (A Song for World War III)." This song from 1965 parodies the 1941 wartime song "Goodbye Mama, I'm Off to Yokohama."¹⁷⁴ Lehrer's song uses similar rhyming couplets and musical phrasing to evoke the same feeling of a rousing, Boy Scout march.¹⁷⁵ The title also plays on this song by J. Fred Coots with the more informal salutation of "so long" rather than "goodbye," another trick of language that Lehrer uses to convey satire.

Figure 3.4 outlines Lehrer's command of breath as he sings over the span of fifteen seconds with one eighth rest breath between a melody spanning a ninth in various vowel configurations, registration shifts, and tempo changes. In one of his more lyrical moments, Lehrer's vocal abilities are on full display in this excerpt.

¹⁷⁴ J. Fred Coots, "Goodbye Mama: I'm Off To Yokohama" *Vocal Popular Sheet Music Collection*, 926 (Score, 1941). <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mmb-vp-copyright/926>

¹⁷⁵ Kathleen E. R. Smith, *God Bless America: Tin Pan Alley Goes to War*. (University Press of Kentucky, 2003).

The image displays a musical score for the song "So Long, Mom" by Lehrer. It consists of five systems of music, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and chords. Specific annotations are present: yellow highlights on the vocal line of the first system (labeled "C7") and the second system (labeled "F dim" and "C7"), and purple highlights on the piano accompaniment of the first system (labeled "C7") and the second system (labeled "F dim" and "C7"). The lyrics are: "He was-n't scared, no - sir - reel. And this is what he said on his way to Ar - ma - ged - don: So long, mom, I'm off to drop the bomb, so So long, mom, I'm off to drop the bomb, so don't wait up for me, But don't wait up for me, But". The score ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

Figure 3.4 Long-winded phrase (in yellow) and germetic instance of chromatic “arousal” (in purple) from Lehrer’s “So Long, Mom”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 116-119.

Another possibility in this section would be to adopt a more flexible rhythmic pattern to account for any added breaths. After some deliberation, a singer might decide that the *dal segno* measure requires a change from two half notes to a quarter note rest and quarter note A-natural to account for an extra amount of time to breathe between sections of the music. Altering the rhythms for technical reasons is not necessarily detrimental to the narrative or dramatic/comedic structure of the story, though such alterations may create a different effect on delivering any intended joke or conclusion.

Final thoughts on performing Tom Lehrer's music as a singer concern: sung or spoken vocal delivery; the ability of the voice to convey a joke; delivering any extended techniques to elicit laughter; and leading an audience in a collaborative environment to deliver the "jokes" to them in a way they understand.¹⁷⁷ This last point addresses not only a musical, but a comedic, issue in using music for humorous intent; clearly delivering a joke with understanding comes not only from the material but in recognizing how to address those jokes in consideration of the demographics of an audience.¹⁷⁸

3.3 Issues as a Pianist

The main research tool through which a pianist may interpret their performance of Tom Lehrer's works lies in the 1981 musical score compiled by Pantheon Books.¹⁷⁹ The book relays information on Lehrer's melodies while not transcribing his recordings. The piano part has been

¹⁷⁷ Valiante, "Can Stand-Up," 41-46. The field of education being an opportunity to model positive behavior practices, Valiante uses practices that stand-up comedians do to prepare material to help teachers find their "comedic voice." A similar point can be demonstrated or replicated as a musical performer here.

¹⁷⁸ Jay Halliburton McCrary, "The effects of listeners' and performers' race on music preferences and the relationship between the listeners' expressed music preferences and expressed preferences for black and white social encounters." (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 1990), 89-96, UMI (9117840).

¹⁷⁹ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, Introduction and Table of Contents.

realized while also including chord charts, and there are even a limited number of references to musical memes in the score.

With this score as a primary text, pianists can analyze and interpret humorous outbursts from the piano. Lehrer's original music can be labeled as germetic when comparing song forms rather than quoting previous music. In addition, performing the borrowed memetic music in Lehrer's introductions will demonstrate a pianist's ability to successfully highlight parody. Finally, an issue with accompanying the popular styles that Lehrer used in his songs is that popular song form accompaniment is not always a unilaterally core skill or concept taught in an undergraduate setting.

This subsection addresses the pianist who is equally familiar with popular music forms, as Lehrer's songs can cater to the strengths and technical abilities of this type of pianist. Addressing technical issues in Lehrer's songs may also prove useful for a classically trained pianist in crossing over to accompaniment skills, whether in small contemporary ensembles, pop groups, contemporary choirs, improvisational troupes, religious services that require vamping, or performing in pit orchestras for musical theatre. Including popular song form accompaniment skills checks in undergraduate piano pedagogy offers an additional way of learning how to play the piano in an undergraduate setting. Including this pedagogical practice will provide future students with a chance to connect with previous knowledge and will further strengthen their understanding of piano accompaniment skills and concepts.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ Melissa Maccarelli Slawsky, "Transitioning from Student to Teacher in the Master-Apprentice Model of Piano Pedagogy: An Exploratory Study of Challenges, Solutions, Resources, Reflections, and Suggestions for the Future," (PhD diss., University of South Florida, 2011), 159-161, ProQuest (3464639).

With respect to the musical score, all of the copies that Lehrer released into the public domain exist in the keys he used for his own performances.¹⁸¹ These songs capture Lehrer's baritone voice range, which places a limit on the voice types that could use these scores in a formal academic setting. One way to overcome this would be to employ pop song techniques involving transposition or auditory renderings of previous transposed performances. One considerable example comes from a 1967 album by Swedish film star Lars Ekborg,¹⁸² who covered an album of Lehrer's songs and sang them in Swedish, with Leif Asp at the piano.¹⁸³ Noted transpositions include Lehrer's "My Home Town" from its original C major down to Bb major with Ekborg's "Min barndoms stad."¹⁸⁴

From a technical perspective, Tom Lehrer never claimed to be an accomplished pianist.¹⁸⁵ There are no extant scores of Lehrer displaying extended piano techniques as a solo artist. Pontus Holmgren's liner notes from Ekborg's album describe a similar criticism of Lehrer the pianist: "Compare, for example, Asp's light-feathered introduction to *Be Prepared* with the square-cornered lead-in in Lehrer's own playing."¹⁸⁶ Many of his tunes are set to chord progressions from pop songs that were familiar to him, if not directly copied from other pieces.

¹⁸¹ Tom Lehrer Songs, "Disclaimer."

¹⁸² Gregory Cohen, "Lars Ekborg," *Tom Lehrer.org*, <http://tomlehrer.com/covers/ekborg.html>

¹⁸³ Per-Anders Boquist and Pontus Holmgren, "Lars Ekborg in Tom Lehrer's Wonderful World," liner notes for Lars Ekborg, *In Tom Lehrer's Wonderful World*, translated by "Fish." Lars Ekborg and Leif Asp, 1967/2002, Amigo AMCO 803. <http://tomlehrer.com/covers/ekborgnotes1.html>

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 127.

¹⁸⁶ Boquist and Holmgren, "Lars Ekborg," liner notes.

Rather than addressing technical difficulty or questioning the ability in Lehrer's music as a pianist, issues and artistic decisions can be found in voicing, texture, and tempo. These techniques allow pianists to successfully play Lehrer's musical memes, evoke the intended style present in his germetic music (**Figure 3.5**), and add to a singer's performance.

MLF Lullaby

Wiegenliedig Words and Music by Tom Lehrer

The musical score for 'MLF Lullaby' is presented in two systems. The first system shows the piano introduction with a melody in the right hand and a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand. The second system shows the vocal entry with lyrics. The piano accompaniment continues with the same eighth-note bass line. Purple highlights indicate the tonic (C) and dominant (G) chords, while yellow highlights indicate embellishments in the piano part.

System 1:

Right Hand: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (half).

Left Hand: C3 (half note), C3 (quarter), C3 (quarter), C3 (quarter), C3 (quarter), C3 (quarter), C3 (quarter), C3 (quarter).

System 2:

Vocal: Sleep, ba-by, sleep, in peace may you slum-ber, No dan-ger lurks, your Why should-n't they have nu-cle-ar war-heads? Eng-land says no, but

Piano: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (half).

System 3:

Vocal: sleep to en-cum-ber, We've got the mis-siles, peace to de-ter-mine, And they all are sore-heads, I say a by-gone, should be a by-gone,

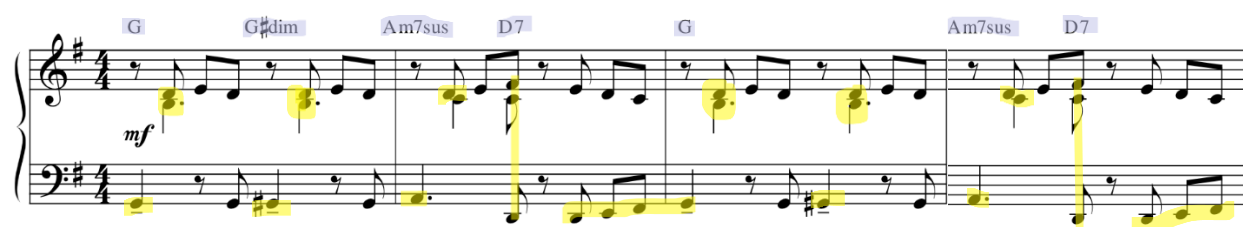
Piano: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (half).

Figure 3.5 Lehrer's germetic music discussing nuclear disarmament set to a lullaby.¹⁸⁷ Purple highlights tonic and dominant chords, with yellow representing embellishments.

¹⁸⁷ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 93.

Previous chapters have outlined the memetic references and various quotations of previous music in Lehrer's piano introductions. A notable similarity lies between some of Lehrer's pieces and the works of the American vocal group The Ink Spots,¹⁸⁸ the pioneering group from the 1930s and 1940s. The Ink Spots used a signature guitar introduction that followed an ascending chromatic progression (**Figure 3.6**), and they used this introduction in all their recorded songs. It is the pianist's responsibility to understand these potential connections and to bring them out to help an audience more successfully perceive the humorous connections associated with these memetic references.¹⁸⁹

Using terms from this project, the introduction seen in **Figure 3.6** can be seen as a germetic marker associated with The Ink Spots, as the group started all their songs with this pattern. Any subsequent music using this harmony would then be a memetic reference to the group. Similar songs or parodies can recall this phrase to create a musical background of a shuffling pop song, which can be used for comedic effect as determined by the pianist. Identifying, isolating, and rehearsing these musical moments as a pianist is an essential way to display humor juxtaposed with the sung melody.



¹⁸⁸ David Sanjek, "Ink Spots, the." *Grove Music Online*. 1 Jul. 2014. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

¹⁸⁹ Harper, "The Art of Humorous Song," 66-68.

So Long, Mom

(A SONG FOR WORLD WAR III)

Words and Music by Tom Lehrer



Figure 3.6 Germetic introduction by The Ink Spots and Lehrer's memetic paraphrase¹⁹⁰

Consulting Lehrer's musical score gives insight into the textual needs of Lehrer's various pieces. Two examples are issues in textual reduction and issues in textual revision or revoicing. If a pianist is following the score to "The Elements," they will notice the right-hand melody doubles the vocal line, which more faithfully follows the germetic melody from "the Major-General's Song." (**Figure 3.7**)

¹⁹⁰ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 116.

As fast as possible

C G7 C G C G7 C G

1. There's
2. There's

an-ti-mo-ny, ar-se-nic, a - lu-mi-num, se-le-ni-um, And hyd-ro-gen and ox-y-gen and
hol-mi-um and he-li-um and haf-ni-um and er-bi-um, And phos-pho-rus and fran-ci-um and

ni-tro-gen and rhe-ni-um, And nick-el, ne-o-dym-i-um, nep-tu-ni-um, ger-ma-ni-um, And
flu-o-rine and ter-bi-um, And man-ga-nese and mer-cu-ry, mo-lyb-de-num, mag-ne-si-um, Dys-

Figure 3.7 Full accompaniment opening of “The Elements;” reduction in yellow¹⁹¹

However, when listening to any of Lehrer’s recordings of the same song, he engages in some form of accompanying reduction, both in musical content and in the technical approach of touch. He accomplishes this by either playing the yellow highlighted chords on the beat or playing both hands on opposite beats and follows the larger chord progressions in the same tempo.

Another example of voicing decisions for the pianist lies in the decision to voice the melody as a pianist. In “The Love Song of the Physical Anthropologist,” the music gives a lead sheet and chord progression rather than a full accompaniment (Figure 3.8). A pianist has several

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 63.

choices regarding voicing when reading a lead sheet, including practicing an efficient hand position to navigate the melody and chords. Sometimes overriding chord symbols is necessary, which a pianist could learn to do in undergraduate classroom settings. Discerning how to interpret and play the music on the page is a useful skill for individual practice, group rehearsal, and for practice supporting solo musicians.

Finally, a pianist may also consider the song's voicing in the lead sheet transcription after listening to one of Lehrer's recordings to determine what is a preferred voicing rather than referencing a literal interpretation of a written score. Though this approach has not been a standard historical practice of piano pedagogy, adding pop song piano pedagogical practices continues to provide benefit for students,¹⁹² both in the classroom and in performance opportunities to expand repertoire. Learning to make music by reading from lead sheets also allows a pianist to market themselves with more versatile career experiences playing from classical, popular, and commercial musical scores.

¹⁹² Accone, "Popular Music and Piano Pedagogy," 74.

THE LOVE SONG OF THE PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGIST

WORDS AND MUSIC BY
TOM LEHRER

NOTE: THIS SONG WAS PROMPTED BY THE OBSERVATION THAT ALL LOVE SONGS WHICH ACTUALLY DESCRIBE ANY PHYSICAL ASPECT OF THE BELOVED LIMIT THEIR COMPLIMENTS TO SUCH THINGS AS HAIR, EYES, LIPS, HANDS, ETC. PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAVE A WHOLE ARSENAL OF DESCRIPTIVE ADJECTIVES AT THEIR DISPOSAL.

6 $B\flat 7$ $E\flat$ Gm/D Cm $A\flat m6/C\flat$ $B\flat 7$

LET ME TELL YOU OF THE MAM-MAL THAT I LOVE, SHE'S
TOUCH IS GRAND OF HER PEN-TA-DAC-TYL HAND, SHE'S MY

11 $E\flat$ $F\sharp dim$ $Fm7/B\flat$ $B\flat 7$ $Fm7$

LOVE-LY, SHE'S CHARM-ING, SHE'S DI - VINE. THAT EC - TO - MOR-PHIC,
MES - O - PRO - SOP - IC VAL - EN - TINE THAT EU - RY - PEL - LIC,

Figure 3.8 Lead sheet, chord symbols for “The Love Song of the Physical Anthropologist”¹⁹³

As a pianist, rehearsing fragmented portions of Lehrer’s music can benefit memory work, whether playing alone or for a singer. Pianists could also use musical memetics as a framing device around which to practice and memorize music.¹⁹⁴ Finding repetition, long-form structures, and interstitial material will create a background of material to recall and use in performance. Audience laughter and other reactions may also change the pace of a joke or meme within a

¹⁹³ Tom Lehrer Songs, “The Love Song of the Physical Anthropologist.”

¹⁹⁴ Slawsky, “Transitioning,” 228-234.

song, so having this knowledge and ability to adjust with a different amount of music will benefit the pianist in a live setting.

Lehrer held an advantage in being his own accompanist and he was able to discern when a piece required more vamping or repeated measures between material if laughter went on for too long. In practice, this means a future musician could learn the skill of vamping and learning to identify music that extends a cadence while maintaining integrity to the structure of the piece, which is beneficial for class piano skills¹⁹⁵ and for the solo pianist.¹⁹⁶

3.4 Issues as a Self-Accompanied Singer

Knowing and addressing the skills in the above section will help the self-accompanied singer as they attempt to perform two instruments at once, as this was the style Lehrer used for his performances. If a singer or a pianist wanted to discover the challenges inherent in performing both instruments, they would continue to utilize the technical and pedagogical skills they know as a solo artist. Additionally, a musician would need to adjust the demands of the musical score to cater to the live performance needs of switching between tasks. The following section outlines a few points of consideration for an artist considering this for their own work.

The task of the performer is to prepare their musical part and perform it with accuracy and artistic intention. This task places technical and cognitive demands on any musician. Combining two tasks of singing and self-accompanying requires an additional set of parameters around which to center a musician's preparation and performance work. Regardless of whether one is

¹⁹⁵ Accone, "Popular Music and Piano Pedagogy," 23-24.

¹⁹⁶ Slawsky, "Transitioning," 193-195.

defined as a skilled singer who accompanies themselves or a skilled pianist who self-vocalizes,¹⁹⁷ there is a balance between performing both parts to equal success.

This balance can be measured as a pianist by recording practice sessions to determine balance and texture levels. Another factor from the pianist's perspective would be in analyzing Lehrer's musical score and determining which accompanying figures are strictly necessary to the performance against figures that can be reduced, avoided, or reharmonized to more directly suit the needs of the singer.

Yet another technique for a pianist to cover in rehearsal and performance is physicality and location onstage. Performing with music will create a visual block for the audience, as would certain placement of the piano in certain configurations, from quarter-turn positions away from the audience to full-stick or half-stick differences in playing grand pianos. Visual interpretations of music do create an impression on the audience, and the pianist's decision to be visually available for interpretation is part of the "experience" of performance.¹⁹⁸

Tom Lehrer's performance career spanned from the early 1950s to no later than 1972, with the odd appearance throughout the end of the twentieth century. This timeline falls just outside what Robin Bier describes as "the last generation of specialists" as a singer-pianist combination.¹⁹⁹ Throughout the nineteenth century, European schools and musicians held cultural and educational practices associated with being able to sing and play piano at the same time. This practice became less rigorously adhered to by the first two decades of the twentieth

¹⁹⁷ Pearse, "Because There is No Basis," 9.

¹⁹⁸ Elsa Knysak, "How is Popular Culture Affecting the Presentation of Classical Music in the 21st Century and Beyond." (PhD diss., Drexel University, 2014), 9, ProQuest (30369880).

¹⁹⁹ Robin Bier, "The Ideal Orpheus: An Analysis of Virtuoso Self-Accompanied Singing as a Historical Vocal Performance Practice," (PhD dissertation, University of York, 2013) 212, ProQuest (10095056).

century, hence Bier's designation of "specialists" in describing self-accompanied singers as a product of a musical education. In Lehrer's time, mastering the skill of a self-accompanied recital would not be perceived as essential to delivering a serious artistic message.

This allows his music to be given serious attention through its subversion of an older art form. It also allows musical memes to refer to previous musical knowledge that he and the audience would know. In this way, performing Lehrer's music is not only performing musical memes, but is itself a meme of a serious music performance. Musicians can emulate this by drawing attention to the memes present in his music with a dedicated rehearsal plan. In addition, they can reflect on what is memetic in contemporary music that could be commented on or presented as a new memetic reference in future performances.

One final example of this contemporary memetic referencing for the self-accompanied singer comes from Lehrer's 1965 ecumenical tune "the Vatican Rag." Claiming to have been inspired by the findings from the Second Vatican Council in 1964,²⁰⁰ Lehrer decided to offer a song that merges a popular song with various aspects of Catholic dogma and worship traditions. The piece uses similar melodies and harmonies from the ragtime genre, with specific parallels to George Lyons and Bob Yosco's 1910 piece "Spaghetti Rag." (**Figure 3.9**)

²⁰⁰ The Tom Lehrer Wisdom Channel, "The Vatican Rag-fabulous version- LIVE FILM from Copenhagen in 1967," October 16, 2012, YouTube video, 0:06-1:09, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvhYqeGp_Do.

Figure 3.9 shows musical notation for "The Vatican Rag" with lyrics and harmonic markings. The score is in 2/4 time and features a piano accompaniment with a melody line and a bass line. The melody line includes lyrics and is marked with *f* (forte) and *cresc.* (crescendo). The bass line includes chords and is marked with *f* (forte). The score is divided into three systems, each with a key signature change indicated by a double bar line and a key signature symbol. The first system is in G major (one sharp), the second in C major (no sharps or flats), and the third in D minor (two flats). The lyrics are: "First you get down on your knees, - Fid-dle with your ro-sa-ries, - So get down-up - on your knees, - Fid-dle with your ro-sa-ries, - Bow your head with great re-spect, - and gen-u-flect, gen-u-flect, gen-u-flect! Bow your head with great re-spect, - and gen-u-flect, gen-u-flect, gen-u-flect!"

Figure 3.9 Harmonic parallels between “Spaghetti Rag” and “The Vatican Rag”²⁰¹

Lehrer’s recordings sometimes included a piano interlude, which usually followed in the same ragtime structure.²⁰² This varied between performances, from a four-measure interlude of the B section of the song to an extended twelve-bar passage that extrapolated on the standard ragtime circle progression (Figure 3.10). What is not specified is what type of music should be included in this interlude material. A self-accompanied singer could play either a memetic copy or a

²⁰¹ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 139.

²⁰² The Tom Lehrer Wisdom Channel, “The Vatican Rag,” 1:27-1:46.

germetic original interlude in a way that resembles Lehrer's germetic music that he included.

These interludes typically sounded like circus music.²⁰³

The musical score for "The Vatican Rag" is presented in four systems. The first system shows the vocal melody with lyrics: "Ev-'ry-bod-y say his own Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son, Do-in' the Vat-i-can A-ve Ma-ri-a, Gee, it's good to see ya, Get-tin' ec-stat-ic an'". The piano accompaniment features a chromatic descent in the right hand. The second system includes a yellow box labeled "To Interlude" between measures 1 and 2, with the word "Rag." written below the piano part. The third system shows the piano part with a "ff" (fortissimo) dynamic and a "sfz" (sforzando) dynamic. The fourth system shows the vocal melody with lyrics: "Get in line in that pro-ces-sion-al, Step in-to that". The piano accompaniment features a chromatic descent in the right hand.

Figure 3.10 Interlude and instrumental cues in Lehrer's recordings of "The Vatican Rag"²⁰⁴

One interlude that follows similar chromatic descents in the melody and has become a linguistic shorthand for buffoonery, false pomposity, and broken expectations in humor is the theme music from Larry David's show "Curb Your Enthusiasm." The first eight measures of this

²⁰³ Fred Jewell. "The Screamer March," C.L. Barnhouse, 1911.

²⁰⁴ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 140.

music has become associated with humor beyond the sitcom and has become a meme that represents disbelief in the face of absurd situations²⁰⁵, much like the “Liberty Bell” march by John Philip Sousa became a musical embodiment of Monty Pythonesque humor.²⁰⁶

If quoted in its original key, this musical meme of “Frolic” by Italian composer Luciano Michelini (**Figure 3.10**) can easily merge with the stylings of “The Vatican Rag.” The self-accompanied singer could whistle the tune, play the accompaniment, or both. Applying this musical meme demonstrates what Lehrer was already doing as early as 1947 by inserting previous music into a piece to engage with the audience’s collective musical understanding. However, this is not to say that an audience found “The Vatican Rag” funny just because it was musically entertaining or that their understanding of what made the piece funny to them was limited to musical jokes. It is rather in the convergence of the music Lehrer made against the lyric content and some extra-musical factors, such as religious affiliation, that stirred emotions and reactions from the audience.²⁰⁷



Figure 3.11 Opening fanfare of Luciano Michelini’s 1974 piece “Frolic”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Jon Burlingame, 2020. “‘Curb Your Enthusiasm’ Music: The Story behind the Italian Tuba March,” *Variety*, January 20, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/curb-your-enthusiasm-theme-music-origin-1203471649/>.

²⁰⁶ Daragh Black Hynes, 2020. “It’s the Way They Play ‘Em: The Funny Side of Instrumental Music.” *RTE.ie*, 7 April 2020. Accessed January 5, 2025, <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0409/1129553-comedic-music-funny-curb-your-enthusiasm/>.

²⁰⁷ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 143. A noteworthy reaction to “The Vatican Rag” was from a performance in which the film star Ricardo Montalban accosted Lehrer, saying, “I love my religion! I will die for my religion!”, to which Lehrer responded, “Hey, no problem, as long as you don’t fight for your religion.”

²⁰⁸ Luciano Michelini, *Frolic*, Universal Publishing Co., 1995.

From ecumenical taunting to oddly specific tempo indications,²⁰⁹ to bare-bones accompaniment figures (**Figure 3.7 above**) to the fleeting exchanges between musicians sharing an inside joke about a title or concept,²¹⁰ Tom Lehrer's music has plenty of opportunities to learn about musical memes. Learning how to make those sounds possible by including popular music literacy in the undergraduate classroom helps to expand a student's knowledge base²¹¹ and strengthen their ability to perform their knowledge.²¹²

3.5 Concluding Recommendations

The first two chapters of this project have outlined what borrowed material is present in a selection of Tom Lehrer's songs. Using the theory of musical memetics, a musician can more easily identify musical memes and label Lehrer's germetic music that mimics or implies memetic treatment of a musical passage. Connecting this material to the lyrics and subject matter of the songs, one can start to identify Lehrer's jokes, innuendos, hints, digs, or commentary. The end of this chapter outlines a small number of general recommendations for vocal or piano techniques to further the humor found in Lehrer's songs.

With all this information at hand, performers can make technical decisions about how to use their voices, fingers, or other musical skills to deliver musical memes in an equally deliberate way as they would studying and performing the music of other contemporary or historical composers.²¹³ These decisions can also cross over into artistic decisions regarding the comedy

²⁰⁹ Cassandra I. Carr, "Charles Ives's Humor as Reflected in His Songs," *American Music* 7, no. 2 (1989): 123–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3052199>.

²¹⁰ Alexander-Hills, "Engaging," 17.

²¹¹ Slawsky, "Transitioning," 179-180. This broaches the subject of teaching confidence-building skills.

²¹² Pearse, "Because There is No Basis," 22-25.

²¹³ Bier, "The Ideal Orpheus," 73-76. Applying self-accompaniment to historical practices in the voice or piano studio may provide equal benefit for student musicians here.

they find in Lehrer's songs. As an example, one singer may find that "breaking" or "corpsing" and laughing at a joke in a piece of music is a fault of a comedy song performance, whereas a pianist may find that telegraphing "incorrect" or "incompetent" playing is a feature that adds to the performance. This is meaningful work to a student's development because it offers students the opportunity to learn and practice more technical skills as a singer, pianist, or both.²¹⁴

Practicing Tom Lehrer's songs allows musicians to consider how they would deliver a joke, and this skill can be transferred to vocal and piano pedagogy. An example of this in applied music lessons would be to ask a student to deliver one of Lehrer's lines without musical notes, but rather as a joke. After noting physical observations and changes, the teacher could then encourage students to sing with that inflection and intention behind the sung melody. Humor, with its ability to split and break expectations, can be displayed with the full spectrum of the human voice and accentuated with the piano.

Brief mention has been made to a singer's options available to them when deciding on how to sing a line with respect to breathing, evenness of tone, and even with variety of diction at their disposal. Singing songs that contain accents requires insight or training,²¹⁵ and this can be practiced alone or with the help of a teacher.

In performing Lehrer's music, a pedagogically sustainable approach would be to practice singing in a popular song style, encouraging accurate notes with portamento to connect to larger leaps as well as an easily produced straight tone sound. In this vocal function, a singer can

²¹⁴ Mueller, Sheryl. "Concepts of Nineteenth-Century Piano Pedagogy in the United States" (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 1996), 141-169, UMI (9613292).

²¹⁵ The Tom Lehrer Wisdom Channel, "Who's Next?" August 27, 2008, YouTube video, 1:38-2:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRLON3ddZIw>. Singers must be especially aware of the effect of using accents with their intended audience (**Refer to Chapter 2.3 above**).

determine what is funny to sing just in the act of producing the voice. From there, a singer can build in vocal colors, vibrato, and any extended vocal techniques to musically tell a joke. This can be achieved even without also adding physical gimmicks because the joke is delivered with enough vocal preparation in mind.

For the self-accompanied singer, there is considerable latitude in successfully overcoming performance issues with Lehrer's works. Primarily, the control over the pacing of Lehrer's songs falls entirely on one person rather than delegating and deciding on points of control between one or multiple others to complete a song. If the singer makes a mistake, the singer can then fix or alter their own mistakes as a pianist and vice versa. The performer as a pianist can gauge audiences' reactions and adjust the accompaniment to play music between or after musical jokes, which the performer as a singer will also know.

A second technical component that may streamline learning and performing Lehrer's music is the fact that he wrote in the style of popular music. While there is merit to learning and memorizing a musical score,²¹⁶ lead sheets and chord charts are alternatives to pianists who may either understand reading from this system or who have a developing understanding of music literacy.²¹⁷ Including popular song repertoire and pedagogy provides access for the student with educational and cultural backgrounds²¹⁸ that would otherwise not be covered in undergraduate piano coursework.²¹⁹ Combining aural skills by listening to recordings, referencing written

²¹⁶ Melody Morrison, "Collegiate Class Piano in the Western Hemisphere: An Investigation of Collegiate Class Piano Courses in North and South America." (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2024) 73-80, ProQuest (31139578).

²¹⁷ Shawn Waterman. "Engaging At-Risk Youth through Bloom's Taxonomy, Socratic Seminars, and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy," (SUNY Empire State College, 2015), 26, ProQuest (1606163).

²¹⁸ Ibid., Abstract.

²¹⁹ Slawsky, "Transitioning," 220-225.

music, and doubling a melody all allows a musician to demonstrate their skills in performing Lehrer's music from either side of the piano crook.

Performing comedy songs can be equally rewarding, entertaining, and challenging for both musicians and audience. Creating an environment in which comedy songs are not just understood but embraced takes effort to perform them as intentionally as one would with art song or concert music. Future musicians are responsible for understanding technical issues in their training. Some technical issues musicians should know may include vocal inflection, melodic/memetic accuracy, comedic intent, rhythm, or balance between piano and voice if accompanying oneself. The support that a student receives in learning to navigate the technical challenges of comedy songs depends upon the teachers and institutions that serve them.

Given the potential of teaching contemporary musical styles through class piano courses and individual piano instruction,²²⁰ the responsibility to offer this avenue of academic and artistic work falls to those in power to teach new songs to students. Past and contemporary scholarship has shown the possibility of creating an educational and artistic environment through musical *and* comedic devices.^{221 222 223 224} Teaching music through the divergent but equally engaging medium of comedy has the potential to offer new and interesting opportunities for students to

²²⁰ Acone, "Popular Music and Piano Pedagogy," 21-25.

²²¹ Valiante, "Can Stand-Up," 97-99.

²²² Bier, "The Ideal Orpheus," 203-212.

²²³ Hankerson, "I'm Not Laughing at You, I'm Learning with You: Using the Fundamentals of Stand-up and Improv Comedy to Increase Student Engagement," (Ed.D diss., Drexel University, 2021), 107-111, ProQuest (28643092).

²²⁴ Goldmark, "Happy Harmonies," 261-265.

expand and clarify how music moves them, even to laughter. I concur with Diazgranados

Berengueuer's sentiments toward musical memetics in practice:

"Memes are highly volatile...mental constructions, embedded within each other in non-strict hierarchies, and potentially engaging in promiscuous intersectionality across multiple replicative vectors...We should embrace this high complexity medium rather than recoil from it, but not without the appropriate framework. Such a framework should be eminently flexible, able to accommodate cultural delimitations at divergent order of magnification...the framework should also accommodate memetic intersections...this property of culture...is very useful for musical memes, where the intersection of a rhythmic meme—say, the distinctive pattern of an allemande—with a melodic meme—a stereotypical melodic descent—can create a complex made of memes replicating across two intersecting media, one melodic and one rhythmic. Other possible parameters on said intersections are the harmonic, the timbral, the textural, or anything else imaginable...

...cultural evolution, with all its surprising twists and turns, represents the unexpected yield of imaginative fructification..."²²⁵

Through performance, musical memes can express what are merely ideas in the minds of an audience.²²⁶ Engaging with music with musical memes in mind also allows musicians to look at standard pieces with a new perspective. This type of study gives future musicians the chance to connect what they are learning to how they process information in the twenty-first century, through memes and ideas consumed through expanding forms of contemporary media.

²²⁵ Berengueuer, "Modular Musical Memes," 38-39.

²²⁶ Valiante, "Can Stand-Up," 96. To quote Valiante about future research potential: "One possible way to expand upon this research would be to identify and analyze the underlying sociological or psychological conventions and expectations found in overall speech patterns and visual cues occurring during comedy shows. This would be used to help explain why certain behaviors manifest, and if, or how, these patterns might be applicable within a pedagogical context."

Chapter 4: Performing and Programming Comedy Songs

“Music is a puzzle; you can’t just put on a whole lot of notes. Harmony, melody, rhythm- all of those things all have to fit together....it’s fun to see if you can satisfy all these constraints...”

-Interview, *Tom Lehrer at 85*

The previous chapter discussed some examples of issues involved in performing comedy songs and memetic music; it also provided some examples of how to address those issues on a technical level. This chapter discusses how to program and include comedy songs in a performance or educational setting. Tom Lehrer’s catalogue of works is an example of popular songs, and songs from that style suggest an understanding that learning and performing them is different from the technical demands of songs written in the classical style. Whereas the former is more focused on balance and harmonic continuity in the absence of some finer details, the classical style of music is focused on interpreting the music as it is written down or annotated.

With Lehrer’s songs, scholars and musicians have access to his collection, which can be read and recited as faithfully as possible; how “funny” or “memetic” such performances would read in a performance remains to be seen. The inverse is true in that his music was written with lead sheets and other popular song forms, which catered to Lehrer’s abilities as a pianist. A performer would need to note any differences in the musical scores against live performances or subsequent covers. A future discussion that may prove interesting would be noting the difference in audience reactions after hearing Lehrer’s musical scores performed as literally as possible versus hearing his music performed with as much adherence to his live performances.

If a teacher or student endeavors to undertake comedy songs in their education, there must be a separate standard for demonstrating knowledge and skills in comedy. This must come from understanding and learning about the history of comedy, comedians, and their practices for

an audience.²²⁷ A theory of comedy includes a theory of comedy songs,²²⁸ and students should study funny songs from the perspective of how the humor works just as much as one would in studying how the music works.

It is necessary for musicians to analyze what comedians are doing with the jokes they are learning,²²⁹ just as one would in analyzing what musicians are doing with the music they are learning. With this knowledge and course of study, both students and teachers can work to include comedy songs into their applied lessons and in their summative performance opportunities. This chapter focuses on the latter concept, with guidance on how to program Tom Lehrer's music in an undergraduate music setting.

4.1 Thematic Programming

Music in a recital format can follow several narrative or thematic structures. Students can learn to identify these structures by listening to concerts by faculty or fellow students, comparing song sets containing similar poetic material, or performing songs that deliver similar musical material. Students can then make further decisions in their own performance standards on whether to pursue musical, textual, or thematic continuity. If learning to effectively communicate is a foundational principle to music performance in an undergraduate setting,²³⁰ then singing or playing to humorous effect requires an equal amount of consideration.

²²⁷ Tracy Wuster, "Comedy Jokes: Steve Martin and the Limits of Stand-Up Comedy," *Studies in American Humor*, no. 14 (2006): 23–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42573700>.

²²⁸ Hollingsworth, "Rhetoric," 34–42.

²²⁹ Schreiber, *Music is Power*, 180.

²³⁰ Vada M. Coleman, "National Music Education Standards and Adherence to Bloom's Revised Taxonomy," (EdD diss., Walden University, 2013), 40–43, ProQuest (28643092).

Tom Lehrer's songs hold technical and artistic challenges that involve pedagogical and artistic awareness. One concept involves lyricism and discerning between a melody with a sung or half-spoken vocal approach. This type of music compared to classical concert music designed to elongate a musical phrase could prove interesting within a single recital or concert setting. Students would need to choose music that is not saturated with too many songs containing either single syllable singing or patter. A concentration of such vocal styles, while worthwhile to demonstrate a mastery of the subjects, would likely prove monotonous. Musicians can conduct further research and performance projects to determine the effectiveness of programming the collective works of a single composer.

Another form of thematic programming could be achieved by including Tom Lehrer in a set of music that comments on subjects covered in his songs. If, as described in Chapter Two, the historical context and the ideas presented in his songs are memetic (borrowed) or even germetic (original, with an intent to inspire further musical memes), then the music that embodies those ideas could be performed alongside similar songs. Musicians interested in performing art music inspired by popular culture could refer to David Harned Johnson's 2016 song cycle *19 Short Songs about Chuck Norris* to identify a contemporary reference for a thematic subject.²³¹

Thematic programming for a student recital setting may also include different versions of the same musical form. If a student pianist wanted to display their ability to perform a waltz, they could include some Chopin *valse*s, equivalent dance forms set to music from a twentieth century composer, and a small set of songs that take the waltz form, with Lehrer's *The Wiener Schnitzel Waltz* as an example. This type of thematic programming could be useful in educational

²³¹ Harper, "The Art of Humorous Song," 61.

settings to demonstrate different ways to write and perform a waltz. Understanding a general idea of how a waltz is constructed and performed can also add to the audience's appreciation for a comedy song in that same style, as they will know what to listen for and wait for any broken or adjusted expectations in the performance.

Students that perform ballads or songs with regionalist or nationalist sentiments may find reason to compare the merits of those types of songs with a parodied version of a nostalgia song taken too far.²³² Likewise, contemporary subjects and songs from the mid-twentieth century discussing nuclear proliferation, military action, or governmental inefficiency may turn to Lehrer as a point of levity or irony within a set of songs covering the same topic.^{233 234}

One extra-musical factor in programming Tom Lehrer's music involves his extensive use of verbal program notes. Delivering such notes for his songs in a recital setting would certainly be appropriate for demonstrating that the upcoming song is a departure from standard procedure. If a performer dedicated an entire set of music to Tom Lehrer, this could be accomplished by speaking additional program notes from the stage or venue, gathering information from Lehrer's recordings and scores as applicable.

If a scholar includes Lehrer's songs into a larger recital set, the same verbal format could be used, though this may not be necessary. Surprising the audience with the musical memes and jokes present in Lehrer's songs may be a desired outcome of a program that contains little background information. Conversely, contextualizing a set of music with verbal program notes

²³² Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 36.

²³³ Tom Lehrer Songs, "It Makes a Fellow Proud to Be a Soldier."

²³⁴ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 106.

provides a chance to break up the audience's task of reading. Ultimately, this decision will need to be decided based on the performer's intent behind music that includes songs by Lehrer.

4.2 Interdisciplinary Programming

Just as a future musician would be tasked with programming and performing musically relevant material to demonstrate learning, this section addresses issues surrounding subject matter, lyric themes, and extra-musical factors surrounding Lehrer's music. The issue of fecundity in the memetic references Lehrer uses lies in whether borrowed memetic material is used again by other songwriters under different conditions. While such comparative work is beyond the reach of this project, the research potential remains to identify how often certain music is used to signal a streamlined, collective idea just by its appearance in another piece.

Another approach to identifying or realizing the memetic impulse in Lehrer's music would be in demonstrating the fecundity of setting non-musical subject matter to song. Similar themes are present in music parodying musicians,²³⁵ sex,²³⁶ comedy,²³⁷ and even music itself.²³⁸ Considering Lehrer's storied career as a Harvard University nomad studying and teaching in the field of mathematics between a seven-year performing career,²³⁹ his interest and inspiration lay in the sciences as much as they did in the arts. Such songs came to him at various points in his career, including his brief stint writing original songs covering a wide range of educational

²³⁵ Flanders and Swann, *The Songs of*, 114-123.

²³⁶ Chuck Miller, "Ruth Wallis: Return of the Saucy Chanteuse," *Goldmine Magazine*, May 1997.
<http://www.chuckthewriter.com/Wallis.pdf>

²³⁷ Harper, "The Art of Humorous Song," 61-62. For more on this, refer to David Harned Johnson's song cycle "19 Short Songs about Chuck Norris" (2016), which is an example of an Internet-forum joke embodied in musical form.

²³⁸ Sowell, "An Analysis," 42. Ben Moore's comedy songs were written specifically for musicians to a musically literate audience with borrowed music. It is therefore accurate to say that Moore's music parodies music itself here.

²³⁹ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 129.

subjects.²⁴⁰ Among these are such songs as “The Professor’s Song,” “A Liter and a Gram,” “dx-dy,” “New Math,” “We’re Talking Algebra,” and “Silent E.”²⁴¹ Whether recalling musical memes or referencing and learning Lehrer’s borrowed songs for background, a singer and pianist can learn, recreate, or synthesize their understanding of the artistic intent behind some of Lehrer’s writing and practices. Setting subjects of the sciences to music offers a unique opportunity for future musicians to relay scientific information using musical techniques.

A companion set that could easily be paired with any of Lehrer’s scientific subjects would be such music as found in *The Biochemist’s Songbook*, written by former University of London biochemistry professor Harold Baum. The book contains information on the source material of borrowed music, which stem mainly from British and American folk tunes.²⁴² In addition, Baum includes drawings and information that describe the scientific principles, theories, or processes described in each musical setting. Such thoroughly detailed information would provide ideal fodder to pad the lining of any future program notes or research projects, regardless of their size or location within such written work.

²⁴⁰ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 144.

²⁴¹ Tom Lehrer songs, “Songs by Title.”

²⁴² Harold Baum, *The Biochemist’s Songbook*, Pergamon Press, 1982, Preface, vii-x.

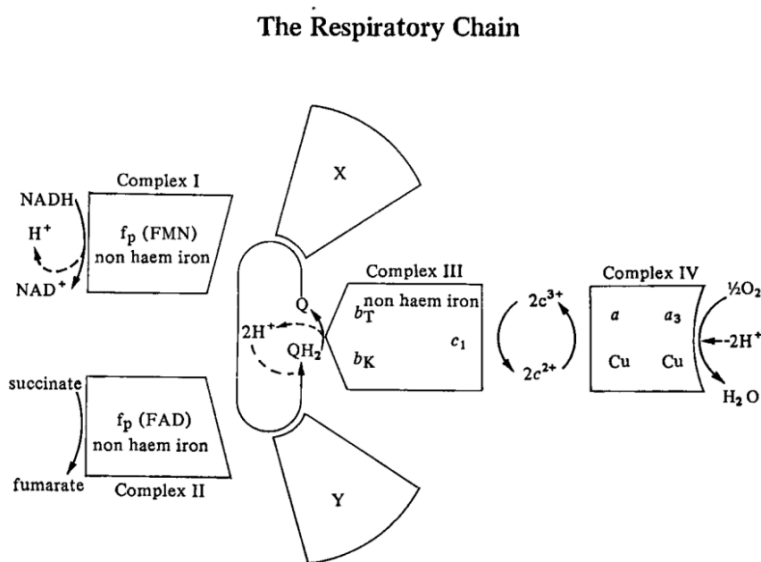
THE BATTLE HYMN OF THE AEROBES

(Tune: "The Battle Hymn of the Republic")

Mine eyes have seen the glory of respiratory chains
In every mitochondrion, intrinsic to membranes,
Functionally organised in complex sub-domains
Where electrons flow along.
Glory, glory, respiration! (*three times*)
Where electrons flow along.

Each chain is a mosaic of Complexes I to IV
Embedded in the lipid (which is what the lipid's for)
But that is not sufficient, there are *two* components more
Where electrons, *etc.*

Figure 4.1 Excerpt of lyrics from "The Biochemist's Songbook"



X and Y are other ubiquinone-reducing flavoproteins (eg. from α glycerophosphate or fatty acyl coenzyme A).

NB.

- (i) The diagram illustrates functional, not structural inter-relationships.
- (ii) All complexes are intrinsic to the inner mitochondrial membrane.
- (iii) *c* (cytochrome *c*) is located extrinsically to the cytosol-facing surface.
- (iv) Q (ubiquinone₁₀) is relatively mobile within the hydrophobic regions of the membrane, but may in part be functionally compartmentalised between protein-associated sub-pools.

Figure 4.2 Accompanying diagram for "Battle Hymn of the Aerobes."²⁴³

²⁴³ Baum, *Biochemist's*, 18.

The questions required of a performer would be with respect to their audience's background knowledge of these pieces that use musical devices to comment on non-musical information. Further, musicians can continue their research by analyzing scientific material and comparing this against the poetic and musical parameters under which Lehrer or others wrote.

Choosing to perform these songs with an audience with a scientific background will have a different reaction than with an audience who is more musically literate. Someone listening to one of Lehrer's songs on science or mathematics may not find it funny because of an issue with the words, whereas a musician may find another issue with the harmonic structure of a piece despite its scientific accuracy. Programming a piece of music with such a wide range of previous knowledge would necessitate a vocal delivery that engages an audience without alienating it.²⁴⁴

In the case of a more scientifically inclined audience, the focus could remain on the vocal dexterity and artistic nuance through which one sings Baum's lyrics. For a musically inclined group, a performer may find the opposite, with a need to contextualize or even break in the middle of the music to account for any scientific information that could be discussed further. For a singer, this would mean singing a melody with deliberate and considerable instances of rhythmic flexibility to highlight the verbose and specialized language Baum uses in his lyrics. Whether using folk tunes as the musical basis for original lyrics or simply referencing them in fragments as Lehrer does, the motivation to use borrowed musical material that pairs with the lyrics of scientific subjects is the result of musical ideas being spread between people, yet another example of memetics used in practice.

²⁴⁴ Valiante, "Can Stand-Up," 80-82. In the context of a stand-up comedian, likeability and relatability are vital to establishing a performance environment conducive to applause, vulnerability, and eventual pushing of boundaries. Similar research and performance practices may be applied in the field of vocal music, for a start.

4.3 Educational Programming

Choosing Tom Lehrer's works to demonstrate a student's understanding of music performance can be achieved in a variety of ways.²⁴⁵ This section will concern itself with two such instances for educational purposes. First, as outlined in the sections above, teachers and students could include Lehrer's music with their current voice studies practices. Second, teachers and students could include Lehrer's musical memetics as an educational tool for engaging in deep-thinking practices concerning music performance. The objective of both can be focused on how to perform Lehrer's music, but this could also be applied to theory and history subjects.

To the former point of vocal pedagogy and practice, just as a student would be required to obtain a knowledge of voice practices to achieve healthy, efficient sounds in an art song recital, so too they need to be informed of the intended effect of Lehrer's songs to bring across any humor in the delivery. This could be studied by having students analyze some of Lehrer's performances and recordings to differentiate between melodies that are sung, half-spoken, or delivered with impressions and exaggerated vocal impressions. Modeling this in the applied studio, having students understand the anatomic requirements to create such vocal impressions, and practicing vocal fold occlusion exercises would aid in this type of practice.

In demonstrating how to successfully use musical memetics as a teaching tool, I will apply Bloom's taxonomy of scaffolded instruction to Lehrer's 1959 song "Clementine," introducing the various skills required to deepen a student's understanding of musical memetics.²⁴⁶ In a 2023 dissertation on a similar subject, Stephanie George outlines the merits of

²⁴⁵ Thomerson, "Parody," 276. Teaching musical parody is, in Thomerson's view, an underappreciated and infrequently used technique that may prove beneficial in future. It's always nice to know someone else gets it too!

²⁴⁶ Coleman, "National," 35.

a student-centered approach to strengthening music literacy by incorporating Bloom’s taxonomy into undergraduate music curricula. Bloom’s taxonomy categorizes six categories, or domains, of processing that can be used in an educational setting. This list contains various verbs that define student actions and responses to new learning, and George creates a similar table applied specifically to a music education setting.²⁴⁷ These graphs also represent the potential for higher ordered thinking, even among minority student populations.²⁴⁸

Cognitive Domain	Verbs/Actions to Demonstrate Learning
Remembering	recall, define, recognize, locate, memorize, match, recite
Understanding	Classify, identify, describe, understand, paraphrase, discuss, explain, restate, locate, summarize, predict, distinguish, match, give examples
Applying	sing, observe, dictate, recognize patterns, sight-read, practice, participate, accompany, contribute, read, realize symbols, play on instrument
Analyzing	distinguish, subdivide, connect, correlate, organize, discriminate, differentiate, infer, guided listening, separate, categorize, examine
Evaluating	error detect, judge, decide, assess, defend, conclude, justify, prioritize, rank, relate, value, evaluate, compare, interpret, defend, rate
Creating	develop, compose, create, improvise, collaborate, synthesize, orchestrate, invent, revise, arrange, compile

Figure 4.3 Stephanie George’s application of Bloom’s taxonomy in a music education setting.²⁴⁹

Programming Tom Lehrer’s music with these domains in mind allows teachers to assess student progress in multiple ways, from the elemental to the abstract. Bloom’s taxonomy is an approach that builds on previous skills on an increasingly deepening level. These domains encompass cumulative actions, requiring a knowledge of previous skills to progress further.

²⁴⁷ Stephanie F. George, "An Interdisciplinary Approach to Music Theory Pedagogy: How Bloom’s Taxonomy Promotes Music Literacy in the First Year Music Theory Sequence for Undergraduates," (PhD diss., Temple University, 2023), 21, ProQuest (30523933).

²⁴⁸ Waterman, “Engaging At-Risk Youth,” 32.

²⁴⁹ George, “An Interdisciplinary Approach,” 29.

From Tom Lehrer's archives, there is no written score for the song "Clementine." However, the lyrics contain not only the words to this song but are also conveniently categorized into the four main parts of the song's memetic gestures.²⁵⁰ Included in this quodlibet are allusions to songs by Cole Porter, a quotation from W.A. Mozart's opera "Don Giovanni," a parody of Thelonius Monk's "52nd Street Theme,"²⁵¹ and a paraphrase of Gilbert & Sullivan songwriting.²⁵² The challenge to understanding this song using musical memetics theory is in its absence of written music, as the work to identifying borrowed material comes from auditory processing of recordings. To counteract this, Bloom's taxonomy offers an alternative way to demonstrate a student's understanding of the comedic effect of Lehrer's chosen musical memes.

Sorted in the following way, instructors and students can engage equally with musical memetics as musical theory, performance practice, and method of assessment:

Tom Lehrer, "Clementine," Applied Skills According to Bloom's Taxonomy	
Cognitive Domain	Verbs/Actions to Demonstrate Learning
A. Remembering	<p>Define "memetics," "parody," "borrowing," "interpretation," "Bebop," "Beatnik," "cadence," "Cole Porter" "W.A. Mozart," "Gilbert & Sullivan," music borrowing practices, previous 100-level music theory terms on harmony and accompaniment figures</p> <p>Recognize borrowed or parodied music by listening to recordings</p> <p>Recall previous knowledge of music theory: diatonic harmony, Classical music accompaniment structures, chord charts</p> <p>Match written musical forms with sound recordings</p> <p>Recite names of parts into which the song is divided</p>
B. Understanding	<p>Classify memetic (borrowed) from germetic (original) musical forms</p> <p>Identify musical memes without prompt from instructor; identify time-stamps or instances of when the music changes from one style to the next; identify chord chart names and order</p> <p>Describe how memetic material affects the performance of the song</p>

²⁵⁰ Tom Lehrer Songs, "Clementine."

²⁵¹ Thomerson, "Parody," 313.

²⁵² Hansen, *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*, 55.

	<p>Explain how recorded music creates memetic material by using previous vocabulary and other music theory terms</p> <p>Restate definitions of borrowed music practices, locate, summarize, predict, distinguish, match, give examples</p>
C. Applying	<p>Sing the melodies present in the song</p> <p>Play melody or accompaniment on instrument</p> <p>Recognize patterns from songs by Cole Porter, Mozart, and Gilbert & Sullivan</p> <p>Dictate melodies or chords after listening to recordings</p> <p>Practice segments of the song to proficient accuracy; could include singing, playing the piano, or both</p> <p>Realize symbols from chord chart progressions; match these with previous dictations</p> <p>Read research on musical memetics or borrowing practices; read musical scores by named composers from borrowed material</p> <p>Accompany piano parts, with recordings of the song or independently</p>
D. Analyzing	<p>Distinguish between quotations of previous songs and allusions to previous musical styles</p> <p>Connect memetic music to original scores; connect historical dates of composition to the composition of the song</p> <p>Differentiate playing styles to highlight memetic material</p> <p>Infer meaning of chosen memetic music</p> <p>Examine the placement of lyrics against borrowed or implied music</p>
E. Evaluating	<p>Detect differences between musical quotation and paraphrasing</p> <p>Decide how to play musical memes for intended performance effect</p> <p>Assess performance issues when playing, singing, or self-accompanying</p> <p>Justify performing the song in a recital or performance class setting</p> <p>Relate information on the context of the song to an audience</p> <p>Evaluate performance issues regarding comedic vs. musical timing</p> <p>Interpret recordings to realize musical score or arrangement</p>
F. Creating	<p>Develop a system to realize music found on recordings</p> <p>Compose a germetic piece of music in the style of “Clementine” OR</p> <p>Compose a germetic piece of music that utilizes more contemporary instances of memetic music</p> <p>Improvise chords when singing the song</p> <p>Collaborate with a singer or pianist to successfully perform the song</p> <p>Synthesize an interpretation of each style presented in the song</p> <p>Arrange recordings of the song to make a musical score</p> <p>Compile a record of musical memes through lyric or musical score reading</p>

Figure 4.4 Application of George’s version of Bloom’s taxonomy for “Clementine.”

For the remainder of this chapter, I will outline the points of student learning in **Figure 4.2.F**, with emphasis on a student's ability to "compose," "improvise," and "arrange."

Music acting as a meme that can be easily, frequently, and accurately copied between people indicates a strong link to previous knowledge of its source material and the need to replicate or reinterpret it.²⁵³ From there, musicians can interpret the relationship between any germetic writing, memetic references, and extra-musical connections to either a musical score or sound recording. In the case of "Clementine," the four musical gestures parodying Cole Porter, Mozart, Bop style, and Gilbert & Sullivan contain both memetic references in the music and contain memetic references outside of music. Just as future scholars can examine the cultural significance behind some of Lehrer's songs as described in Chapter Two of this project, "Clementine" offers an opportunity for a similar analysis. From there, "Clementine" can itself become a tool to express contemporary musemes.

With respect to the definitions from **Figure 4.2.D. and E.** respectively, listeners can *connect* and *relate* their previous knowledge of the musical works of Cole Porter to the musical parodying present in Lehrer's first iteration of "Clementine." Such parallels include:

Lehrer, lyrical excerpts from "Clementine"²⁵⁴

"Oh Clementine, can't you tell from the *howls* of me
This love of mine calls to you from the *bowels* of me
Are you discerning the returning
of this churning, burning, yearning for you?"

Porter, "Night and Day"²⁵⁵

"Night and day, under the *hide* of me
there's an oh, such a hungry yearning
burning inside of me"

²⁵³ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 236-237. Jan outlines here how "the principle of replication underpinning memetics is a special and...an undervalued property...a replicated pattern...singular and distinctive to...a cultural community, is afforded a certain primacy by virtue of this copying..."

²⁵⁴ Hansen, *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*, 55.

²⁵⁵ Cole Porter, Moss Hart, Robert J. Lee, and Dr. Albert Sirmay, *The Cole Porter Songbook*, (Simon & Schuster, 1959), 32-33.

“...far away from the boom, boom, boom of the city...” “...like the beat, beat, beat of the tom-tom”

In the words of the New York Times, Lehrer’s music “is not fettered by such inhibiting factors as good taste,”²⁵⁶ and he certainly demonstrates his going slightly too far with two extra internal rhymes. Lehrer also uses music from Porter’s musical profile, including a quotation from Porter’s “Begin the Beguine,” which can be heard on Lehrer’s live recordings.²⁵⁷



Figure 4.5 Introduction to Cole Porter’s 1935 song “Begin the Beguine.”²⁵⁸

The tasks required to include “Clementine” into a musical recital, concert, or program requires considerable research on the musician’s part. Using music borrowing techniques to identify musical memes, discerning recalled music through recordings, and synthesizing information through effective rehearsal and performance techniques takes deliberate effort. Add to this the historical context behind Lehrer’s writing period, and the challenge deepens in terms of what musical material is being used as a meme to a contemporary audience. Despite program notes or other information before performing this piece, there remains a disparity of significance in the presentation of musical memes that have not maintained a sufficient level of fecundity.

Including dated musical and cultural references is a way to see how musical ideas, especially ones concerning popular music and relevance with an audience, develop and evolve

²⁵⁶ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 133. Performance review of Lehrer by *The New York Times*.

²⁵⁷ Alexander Shekhtman, “Clementine,” December 20, 2015, YouTube video, 0:30-1:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5u4n64g2G0>

²⁵⁸ Porter et al., *Songbook*, 68.

between generations of listeners.²⁵⁹ With its popularity giving way to artists like John Coltrane and other avant-garde jazz groups, audiences of the time would have likely been more acutely aware of the more predictable formulas that defined Bebop, thereby making those structures more susceptible to a memetic treatment for the purposes of parody.

Finally, while there is a stylistic allusion to a song from Gilbert & Sullivan's 1872 opera *The Sorcerer*,²⁶⁰ the prevalence of this reference may equally be seen as a germetic amalgamation of compositional techniques by Sir Arthur Sullivan. Overall, the frame of reference for some of these musical memes have become lost in the meme pool²⁶¹ to the extent that performing "Clementine" would be more of a programmatic choice to demonstrate a student's understanding of a medley of tunes rather than an understanding of musemes because the significance of these memes are much further removed from the original interpretation.

In the same way that Tom Lehrer uses previous knowledge of well-known composers and compositional techniques that span multiple generations, so too can musical memetics be used to analyze and relate to the music that contemporary audiences consume. Synthesizing such memes into a new memetic work is subjective, as memes are "fluid constructs" and may not be viewed between all musicians.²⁶² To successfully program and perform an original piece using the devices and memetic references in "Clementine", one must consider the previous dates between Lehrer's compilation and the music he references.

²⁵⁹ Harper, "The Art of Humorous Song," 8.

²⁶⁰ @SillySongswithLehrer, "Songs that Inspired Tom Lehrer," YouTube video, 7:23-8:40. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yc5utvmLn74>. The editor of this video perfectly encapsulates in a mere nine minutes what has now taken me one year and eight months to articulate in this paper. One of us should probably be more upset about that fact, but I don't have an answer as to who would even win in that scenario. I leave it with you, dear reader.

²⁶¹ Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 250.

²⁶² Berenguer, "Modular Musical Memes," 11.

Despite nearly two-hundred-year gap in premieres, Lehrer's Mozartian reference holds significance to those with a specific understanding of the source of the musical meme present in "La ci darem la mano." Even if this was not apparent or previously known, the memeplex of Alberti bass patterns, cadential expansion, and a diatonic accompaniment part that features scalar passages in thirds indicate a Mozartian style of parody for an audience to interpret. Another reference alludes to Lehrer's personal preference to the musical salubrity of Gilbert & Sullivan, who were writing their most well-known operettas a century before Lehrer's career.

References to Cole Porter and Bebop jazz reflect a certain tongue-in-cheek sense of irony, as the height of popularity for both these genres ranged between the 1930s and 1940s, respectively. A contemporary audience member from 1960 and 2030 will have different memetic understandings of borrowed music from twenty years before their time compared to music from two hundred years before. This is yet another example of how music and memetics intersect. Future musicians can employ the sixth domain of Bloom's taxonomy through *arranging* or *composing* a new piece of music that functions as a memeplex for a contemporary audience.

The challenge and intent of this final domain of scaffolded instruction would be for students to draw their own conclusions and opinions of the music they have studied to effectively create a similar humorous effect. This must include and account for music that is borrowed and used for secondary meaning- memetically. The most effective demonstration of this process of *creating* would be in choosing popular composers, songs, or styles to parody. Choosing music that a group of people have decided means one idea, despite its original context, is to pass along information between people using music as the language through which that idea is expressed.²⁶³

²⁶³ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 229.

Rather than *dictating, playing, or analyzing* Lehrer's material after *listening* to his recordings, musical memetics theory would allow for borrowed musical material to act as a "vessel" of original inspiration. Through creating original music, using musical memes suggests that a composer or arranger would draw upon extrinsic, competitive factors of previous music.²⁶⁴ If, for example, the intent of a musical meme is to highlight the differences between a popular song and the music of George Crumb, one could set such a tune in Crumb's style to demonstrate this disparity. Whether a piece is worthy of parody is up for the performer to decide.²⁶⁵

Another way to engage with musical memes would be to borrow music used by social media applications.²⁶⁶ Which pieces of music are being borrowed in viral video trends or frequently shared posts between people? Can this music be replicated on a recital stage? Making such ideas understood, replicable, and performed for their intended audience²⁶⁷ is how a student can demonstrate their understanding of what a musical meme is and how to perform them.

With the application of Bloom's taxonomy listed in this chapter, teachers and students can equally engage with comedy song content from multiple levels of understanding, with Lehrer as a start. Applying scaffolded instruction to learning about Lehrer's music can also apply when defining his music as a meme, memeplex, or mnemotype. Programming Lehrer's music with these factors in mind allows for comedy songs to be integrated into a musical program, whether through shared musical content, shared thematic material, or through using musical memetics as a tool to demonstrate the efficacy of borrowed material in a song.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 252.

²⁶⁵ Saiki, "The Vocalizing Pianist," 7.

²⁶⁶ Akinfenwa, "A Brief History of 'Cursive Singing.'"

²⁶⁷ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 228.

Chapter 5: Future Research Questions

“In the new approach, as you know, the important thing is to understand what you are doing
rather than to get the right answer.”

-Tom Lehrer, program notes for “New Math”

5.1 Conceptual Framework

This project encapsulates a research endeavor I started nearly six years ago. As a music performer and educator, I have been curious to know what motivates people to learn about music and how people apply their knowledge of music into their studies. Whether through personal experience or by observing applied lessons with my voice and piano students, I started noticing some trends among musicians learning comedy songs.

One trend was in the singer’s attempts at singing in “accents,” “impressions,” or in non-classical musical styles. Some of these vocal quirks came from students listening to recordings of their comedy songs and performing them with the original artist in mind; others seemed to come from inspiration after reading and singing the music on their own. Another trend I noticed was in how easily singers managed to move between a fully sung to a *sprechstimme*, half-spoken vocal delivery. I attributed a portion of this phenomenon to the students copying or mimicking recordings. Finally, I noticed students were learning how to interpret the music in service to a joke rather than interpreting the poetry or narration as an extension of the music. This process was subjective but effective; it not only seemed to help singers learn their music more quickly, but it also provided multiple interpretations of a melody for my students to use in a performance.

I found myself getting stuck trying to convey issues regarding diction and expression without resorting to teaching in the Western classical tradition. This provided mixed results between some of my students, and I thought there was likely another way to address technical issues in the studio without making classical pedagogy the default setting. Such instruction does

not always consider the diverse and individualized learner; teaching a new concept of comedy songs indicates that a new approach to teaching them may be more helpful.

Researching Tom Lehrer's songs has allowed me to focus on two subjects: the idea of memetics and the idea of comedy. I have conceptualized this project as being the convergence of these two ideas of memetics and comedy as a new and engaging area of research and academic inquiry. The chart below is a visual representation of how these two concepts interact and how they may be influenced by certain independent variables. This chart could demonstrate guiding questions to the start of a course on comedy songs or it could be used by performers to help analyze music into memetic, comedic, and other types of performable music.

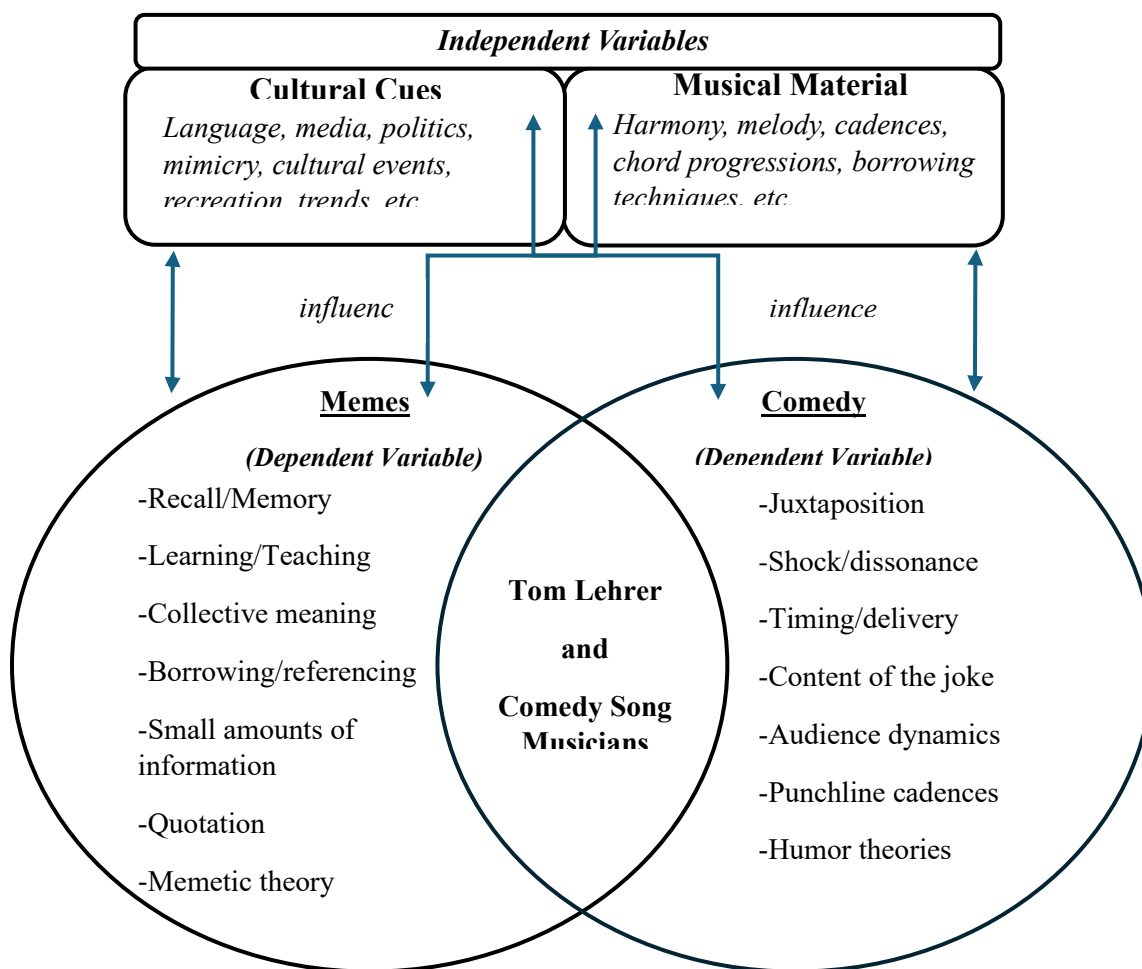


Figure 5.1 Venn diagram, Lehrer's link between music, memes, and comedy.

In this written project, I have been wrestling with how to organize thought between memes and comedy being used as either technical or artistic tools. Both can add to a performer's artistic process, but memetic and comedic music can also provide separate, if parallel, functions for the musician to use in performance. As I conceptualized this project, I came to find that Tom Lehrer's music is informed by cultural cues that are encoded in his audience through memes, but his expression of cultural memes is presented through borrowed music, which takes the form of musical memes. Using music as a tool through which an audience can synthesize a memetic understanding of cultural information is the bridge upon which Lehrer's music sits.

I believe Tom Lehrer's songs, as well as contemporary comedy song musicians, could be described using a memetic theory of music because music used for comedic purposes can serve a similar function to music used for memetic purposes. Though memes do not necessarily have to be considered funny to be effective, humor is a strong method of effective communication. For memes to survive in the seemingly infinite number of abstract ideas known as the meme pool, Dawkins states that memes must undergo a type of evolutionary mutation. This process blends ideas together to form a cultural or collective understanding²⁶⁸ that can be easily and frequently repeated at its most essential fragment; the same can be said of musical memes specifically.²⁶⁹

Establishing a connection between humans is the basis for transmitting cultural information, and doing so through humor may be one of the more idiosyncratic and interesting ways through which humans can communicate. Identifying what people think is musically funny may prove as engaging as attempting to identify what is funny in other, non-musical memes.

²⁶⁸ Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 252-253.

²⁶⁹ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 209-211. The summary of this section includes the following phrase: "...one can identify two basic realms of memetic analysis, the intra-work level (intraopus style)...and the inter-work level (the level of the individual meme, and also of idiom, dialect and rules...)"

5.2 Future Questions

This project underscores the importance of intentionality behind rehearsing, performing, and programming Tom Lehrer's works. Just as a singer and pianist would discuss how or when to breathe, pause, accelerate, or highlight any musical material from a Gilbert & Sullivan aria or a Schumann *lied*, the decisions behind choosing to sing a piece by Tom Lehrer requires the same critical and technical undertaking. The varied and deliberate artistic choices outlined in the previous chapters are necessary to accurately perform the music, deliver the intended humor, and determine program placement in a concert setting. It is my sincere hope that this project more clearly displays the memetic, germetic, and parodic material present in Lehrer's works and provides a sort of catalogue reference point for singer, pianist, and educator for future study.

Researching and performing Tom Lehrer's works provides more than simply an answer to an encore song or the subject of a musical revue. Using Lehrer's songs to understand memetics applied to music theory is a direct, if rudimentary, example of the subject, and using this material allows future musicians to study music with an evolving scholarly format. The musical works of Tom Lehrer are a clear example of memetics as applied to the field of musicology. The twenty-first century musician will benefit from studying music using similar research methodologies to inform their current and future work.

What remains of this project are questions surrounding the significance and continued demand for comedy songs like Lehrer's and those of his contemporaries. What, after all, are the artistic merits that can be gained singing this type of music? How does this music strengthen the young singer's education? How does the "sick humor"²⁷⁰ that also describes Tom Lehrer's music

²⁷⁰ Bell, Hallie J. "Audience Affect and Dark Comedy: A Study of Seth MacFarlane." (MA thesis, University of Wyoming, 2016), 40-45, ProQuest (10161571). This is a separate, but parallel, example of "sick humor."

add to the aesthetic of other types of humor in song form?²⁷¹ Why is there any need to perform these songs if the subjects of their ridicule are out of the public consciousness? Why is it necessary to recreate an art form that was, for all intents and purposes, never meant to survive the understanding of its initial audience? What responsibility is there in choosing to perform or not perform Lehrer's music, especially when some of the music and lyrics very explicitly define- and perhaps tacitly codifying- cultural stereotypes?

Apart from Lehrer's own admission of his artistic ambitions: "...I think comics want people to go home thinking, 'wasn't he funny, wasn't she funny?' I wanted people to go home thinking, 'weren't those songs funny?'"²⁷² The intended process and reception of comedy songs are the same as any art song, which is to clearly deliver poetry or words with musical accompaniment to a desired or stated effect. Regardless of a meme's scale or design, the fact that any secondary musical material within a piece of music is written down shows that the composer intended for it to be present, and music can carry extra-musical meaning that will continue to garner deeper conversation. Learning to identify these types of memetic material is a skill that can be taught and forwarded to new musicians, which is a foundational skill in listening, analyzing, and interpreting music.

5.3 Future Research

Some questions for future study and appreciation would be in considering whether memetics has been applied to music that has historically held cultural or symbolic significance, or rather, whether certain music has been more subject to memetic evolution than others. These

²⁷¹ Tom Lehrer, "Tom Lehrer interviewed by John Tidmarsh," YouTube, 0:40, last edited October 30, 2021.

²⁷² Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 142.

questions could take the form of discussion questions in undergraduate survey music appreciation or history courses, such as:

- 1) Why does some music get frequently used in cartoons, commercials, movies, social media postings, and the like, where other music is almost always found *only* in specific locations under limited circumstances- concert halls, at the beginning of baseball games, during funerals, etc.?
- 2) What determines whether a piece of music is “funny”? How do we come to define humor through music?
- 3) Are there any pieces of music that are considered “incorruptible” or not fit for reinterpretation, and why would this be?

Classrooms could benefit from using the language of musical memetics to more easily understand the progression and development of, for example, nationalist or patriotic music. Reactions to “The Star-Spangled Banner”- from Roseanne’s performance art rendition²⁷³ to Ingrid Andress’ performance under the influence²⁷⁴ to José Feliciano’s controversial revisionist melody during the 1968 World Series-²⁷⁵ demonstrate the strong opinions and reactions audiences have about how that song should be performed. Such similar songs can become a meme of another kind. When a piece of music has longevity, has popularity among a large population in a nation, and can be boiled down to a single, easily repeated idea- a kind of memetic propaganda. Such a claim could be the basis for discussion in music courses as a start, but these same questions could be posed across multiple departments for critique and review.

Seriously studying comedy songs using this and similar research is useful for future students by expanding knowledge in two areas:

²⁷³ Cynthia Janovy, “Roseanne Barr’s High Art,” *The New York Times*, August 1, 1990, <https://nyti.ms/4j5dJIR>.

²⁷⁴ Steven Thompson, “Ingrid Andress, whose national anthem went viral, says she was drunk,” *National Public Radio*, July 16, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/07/16/g-s1-10930/national-anthem-home-run-derby>

²⁷⁵ Roger Weber, “The 1968 National Anthem Performance that Changed José Feliciano’s Career,” *WBUR-FM, Boston*, April 12, 2019. <https://www.wbur.org/onlyagame/2019/04/12/jose-feliciano-susan-tigers-world-series>

- 1) Breadth of knowledge of twentieth-century composers and performers who made an impact on the expression of European classical music
- 2) Depth of knowledge of vocal pedagogy in comedy song performance

Much like an undergraduate student can learn more about piano pedagogy by learning the history of piano instructors and the lineage of teachers,²⁷⁶ the lineage of comedy song fecundity can be a further topic of research. As previous chapters have outlined, musical memes as ideas are spread and refined between people. This can become an activity or skill of research to more accurately trace the origins of musical memes to its memetic mutation and track its evolution between multiple pieces, if applicable.

Another aspect of this first concept would be to expand the knowledge of comedy song composers and performers. If performing art songs and recitals are a mandatory component of undergraduate music scholarship, then adding more to this field will be a benefit to students in adding to the diversity of musical periods and styles. This could culminate in the creation of a survey course of comedy song musicians that identify and study important comedy songwriters and performers. From Peter Schickele²⁷⁷ to Ray Stevens,²⁷⁸ Victor Borge²⁷⁹ to Weird Al Yankovic²⁸⁰ and even Bo Burnham would be the start of discussing the influence of American comic musicians in a college-level environment.

²⁷⁶ Mueller, "Concepts," 57.

²⁷⁷ Davis, "Humor, Structure, and Methodology," 190.

²⁷⁸ Hollingsworth, "Rhetoric," 81-140 for a perspective on the tropes and scenarios of singer Ray Stevens.

²⁷⁹ Kreutzer, "Televising Taste," 171-185.

²⁸⁰ Thomerson, "Parody," 294. Appendix I is an exemplary starting list of parodists for musicians' benefit.

Emerging musicians could find musical memes and parodic material present in the performances of popular music artists including, but not limited to: Charles Ives, Lucille Bogan, Carl Stalling, Anna Russell, Joyce Grenfell, The Three Stooges, Abbott & Costello, Ruth Wallis, the Marx Brothers, Spike Jones, Allan Sherman, Rusty Warren, Carol Burnett, and Frank Zappa, to name some strictly twentieth-century musicians. Discussing how each artist uses musical memes would also provide students with an opportunity to engage with cognitively complex thinking, which encourages deeper understanding.²⁸¹

As detailed in Chapter Three, applying the humorous voice to adequately perform Lehrer's songs is a deliberate artistic choice and a matter of understanding and highlighting memetic, germetic, and parodic material for the benefit of the audience. Achieving these vocal feats requires planning, rehearsing, and recalling in rehearsal for well-executed performances. Microphone technique notwithstanding (and another potential subject of research for another day), the ability to use the voice to deliver the lyrics with the intended "tone" requires a deeper understanding of the text and its sources.

From Chapter Two, I have highlighted the socio-cultural implications of the musical meme. The meme carries with it the risk of engaging with and encouraging stereotypes because of the mnemotypes present in a series of notes, rhythms, intervals, and orchestration.²⁸² When these are compiled into one memotype and then repeated with enough frequency, intensity, and accuracy between people, places, or events that promulgate hateful ideas, then the meme becomes their linguistic representation.

²⁸¹ Robert J. Marzano, *The New Art and Science of Teaching*, (Solution Tree Press, 2017), 72-76.

²⁸² Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 63-65. Jan addresses concept of *Gestalt* segmentation and discusses component elements here with respect to building blocks necessary for identifying a meme.

An inverse risk is true with the protest song. A collective understanding of a musical style stops representing social change when its performance is changed according to the restrictions of a specific political cause or group's understanding of that style. Such was the case when Bob Dylan "went electric"²⁸³ after building a career of crafting protest songs with his idiosyncratic, anti-germetic arrangements and acoustic vocal style.

Musicians can critically study musical memes and apply their usage to twenty-first century performance and programmatic practice. Researchers could continue the work of humor studies in cross-cultural educational settings²⁸⁴ and create surveys of humor using musical memes for a diverse student population. Another research area of piano pedagogy would be in studying the differences between performing as a self-vocalizing pianist as it relates to body mapping, performance anxiety, and gendered expression.²⁸⁵

Future research for the singer may include extended and alternative vocal techniques for comedic effect. This study will add to the student musician's abilities to demonstrate and discuss how their voice works in applied practice. One would, for instance, understand the difference between various types of Baroque ornaments after having studied scores, treatises, and recordings. Similar work can be done when reviewing Lehrer's music on the page against performance standards and taste preferences, specifically in half-spoken vocal delivery, rhythmic flexibility, and gag singing. These Lehrer songs can act as an offset or counteraction to the technical tensions and difficulties present in other, more demanding works, or they could simply be a song of another type of difficulty to add to the vocal performance. The songs set for

²⁸³ Weissman, *Talkin' 'bout a Revolution*, 210.

²⁸⁴ Waterman, "Engaging," 4-6.

²⁸⁵ Saiki, "The Vocalizing Pianist," 3.

comedic effect in a recital setting would need to be addressed just as consciously as one would program two sets of music with similar tempi, lyric themes, or languages.

Future work this project can help foster would be through other subjects in humanities fields. Whereas this research was focused on the memetic and germetic musical devices of one composer, it would be of benefit to musicians to better define memetic devices that are used by multiple composers. Further, a future research goal would be to examine comedy songs written by composers in a similar time but from different cultural backgrounds.

One small example of this would be in differentiating between the sense of humor found in the music and lyrics of American English and British English songwriters, from rhyming schemes to the prevalence of specific concluding cadences. Understanding the syntax and structure of humor through language has the added potential to outline more concrete differences between language as a cultural identifier, which would be significant work in language arts and sociology fields. Such differences could be highlighted in a concert of music originating from British music halls and interspersed with American Tin Pan Alley tunes or jazz standards.²⁸⁶ This subject could also be an engaging topic for history courses, joining the methodologies of research with a practical application of historical information into an interactive project.

Another possibility for interdisciplinary work and further research would be in examining the musical works of comedy song writers from the perspective of its intended audience or subject area. What do music students find funny, interesting, or engaging about Tom Lehrer's music in, for example, "The Elements" or "The Love Song of the Social Anthropologist" compared to those of a chemist or a biologist? Does setting the words of Flanders and Swann's

²⁸⁶ Cray, *The Erotic Muse*, 344-346.

“The Gnu” or “The Sloth” create a humorous effect for zoology students compared to music performance majors? How does scientific accuracy add to or detract from Harold Baum’s scientific songs? (See **Figure 4.2 above**) Programming comedy songs requires a performer to ask questions like these in consideration of their audience and context, not dissimilar to considering what to write for program notes in a recital or chamber music setting.

One last interdisciplinary subject of deeper learning is in attempting to define Lehrer’s works as satirical. Lehrer himself doesn’t consider himself a satirist,²⁸⁷ yet Lehrer is almost invariably described as such throughout his career.²⁸⁸ Indeed, various historical texts that attempt to define subgenres within comedy songs have a difficult time placing satire within its confines. On writing *The Oxford Book of Comic Verse* and how he determined which poems were fit to be included, John Gross wrote:

“...in the case of comic verse, one notably problematic area is satire. As an expression of hatred or contempt, it carries us too far beyond comedy for comfort. As a form of ridicule, on the other hand, it shades into the more general category of what might be called ‘comic verse with a sting.’ Genial satire, in short, is a variety of comic verse, savage satire isn’t; satire which takes its chief pleasure in contemplating its target qualifies, satire which takes its chief pleasure in demolishing its target doesn’t...”²⁸⁹

This appears to be an apt description of Lehrer’s works. Gross also seems to consider Lehrer as a songwriter that uses “comic verse with a sting” because he included the lyrics to “Wernher von Braun” in the anthology.²⁹⁰ Clarifying the definition of “genial” and “savage” satire is an

²⁸⁷ @steelbeard1, “Tom Lehrer Interview NPR,” 6:16.

²⁸⁸ John Wilson, “Tom Lehrer Offers Song Satires Here,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1958. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1958/04/19/81988868.html?pageNumber=10>.

²⁸⁹ John Gross, *The Oxford Book of Comic Verse*, (Oxford University Press, 1994), xxxi.

²⁹⁰ Gross, *Oxford*, 415.

interesting conversation that could be carried out in multiple areas, from music courses to language classrooms and even into philosophical and sociological discussions.

What aligns is the idea of satirical and bawdy lyrics belonging to a type of oral tradition whose efficacy goes beyond the means of writing lyrics down.²⁹¹ Gross recognizes this latitude of what is considered “funny”:

“...comic verse has its masters and masterpieces...Prade and Hood and W.S. Gilbert (to say nothing of Chaucer and Byron)...but an anthology...ought to find...some space for the anonymous limerick...the advertising jingle, the marching song, the music-hall monologue, the little piece of nonsense that you can’t get out of your head.”²⁹²

Such debates of what satire is, how it is defined or exemplified, and how it can be performed is exemplified in Lehrer’s records and video archive performances, and future students can refer to Lehrer’s music to find additional ways to express salient political and cultural satire, both through his lyrics and through his use of musical memes.

5.4 Future Reflections on Satire and Social Commentary

Tom Lehrer’s career as a songwriter and performer is an example of Steven Jan’s memetics theory applied to music as being a “vessel” for artistic and memetic expression.²⁹³ His parodying of contemporary musical tunes, styles, and lyrical structures demonstrates his advanced knowledge of the art form, even if he was not aware of the concept of the musical memes he was writing and performing.

In addition to this, Lehrer synthesizes his knowledge of music into original song formats that perpetuate previous musical ideas, suggesting an understanding of the longevity of musical

²⁹¹ Cray, *The Erotic Muse*, xxx-xxxi.

²⁹² Gross, *Oxford*, xxxiii.

²⁹³ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 252.

memes between people. Lehrer's reinterpretation of a previous musical idea into a new idea using satire, subversion, innuendo, and patter indicates his understanding of a meme's fecundity, or ability to spread between people. Finally, his inclusion of previous music in easily identifiable fragments suggests he had an understanding that previous music must retain most of its original meaning, even if used in a new way.²⁹⁴

Students wishing to understand this music and the humor therein will benefit from understanding the central concepts of musical memetics. Further, this theory can be applied to a diverse range of musical styles, which adds to a singer or pianist's knowledge of twentieth century performance practices and tastes. This project's initial findings suggest that this theory of musical memetics applies in music performance. Similar studies on musical memes can be extended in the recital hall, musical hall revue, stage or screen, and in the classroom.

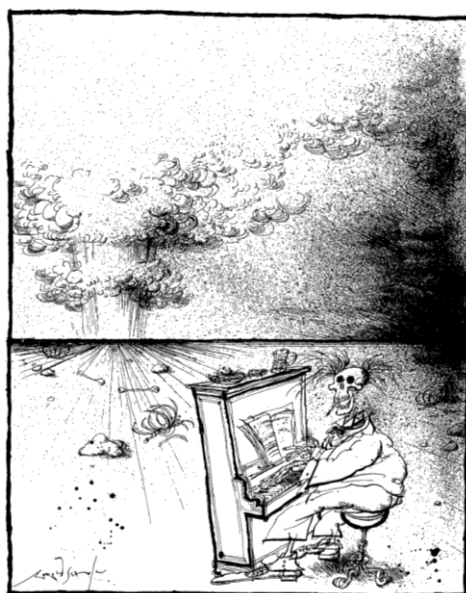


Figure 5.2 Final illustration by Ronald Searle, *Too Many Songs* by Tom Lehrer²⁹⁵
Also pictured Evan Mitchell after completing a performance guide to musical memetics

²⁹⁴ Thomerson, "Parody," 8. Thomerson's work focuses on the claim that "parodists rely on pre-existing music" as a means of expressing humor.

²⁹⁵ Lehrer and Searle, *Too Many Songs*, 143.

Lehrer's music is a form of entertainment, as comedy songs are intended to be.²⁹⁶ From Gerald Nachman, "...for Lehrer, performing simply stopped being fun anymore, a factor seldom acknowledged by performers who keep performing more out of habit or need than fun..."²⁹⁷ Though he has never chided his supporters when discussing his music, the subject has never been a necessity for him to discuss. Neither has Lehrer considered himself a political figure, despite some of the coded messages in his music.

For these reasons, students and musicians should not take the music of Tom Lehrer as music to be idolized or repeated as some faithful rendition of itself. Lehrer suggests as much with revised lyrics, individual arrangements, and adjusted topical references. Further, just because Lehrer discusses socially charged topics or addresses difficulties in a cynical way does not automatically make him a political songwriter. From Dick Weissman on protest songs:

"...songs are about whatever their authors want to write about. Certainly, artists will continue to write songs about social and political issues, and sometimes the songs reflect changes in the writer's ideas...many artists write songs about a specific issue that concerns them...this doesn't magically transform them into protest singers..."²⁹⁸

Lehrer's pieces instead remain a commentary through memetic and even humor theories:

"...comedy occurs when a violation is perceived as normal...in order for a situation to be perceived as normal, it must be appraised as being a violation while simultaneously being considered benign...[and] the commitment to the violated norm must be weak..."²⁹⁹

If Lehrer's music is funny, how does he do this? Why do audiences find his music funny? Future musicians can raise similar questions concerning Lehrer's music or other comedy song musicians.

²⁹⁶ Harper, "The Art of Humorous Song," 3.

²⁹⁷ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 140-142. A second quote from this excerpt: "...he told the BBC...[in 1965]...I realized after two weeks, no, I wasn't going to be hooked again. I'm really not ready for two weeks at Freddy's in Minneapolis. As I've often said, if you've been to Cincinnati there's no need to go to Cleveland..."

²⁹⁸ Weissman, *Talkin' bout a Revolution*, 226.

²⁹⁹ Bell, "Audience Affect," 2.

Conclusion: On the Use of Memetic Music

“Hello, I must be going. I’m glad I came, but just the same, I must be going.”
-Groucho Marx

Regardless of his intent, Lehrer’s writing provides commentary on the blurring of satire and humor and the memeticization of art as a commentary on social consciousness. Memes are not the ultimate outcome of thought between humans, just as evolution is not the ultimate outcome of biology. Memes are rather a nonlinear function of the development of human brains. Musical memes that continue to be consumed without examination or critique run the risk of being reduced to providing “...little difference between songs and commercials...”,³⁰⁰ lessening the impact of songs intended to protest, reflect, or inspire. At their worst, art can even promote unethical laughter,³⁰¹ espouse hatred,³⁰² and promulgate stereotypes.³⁰³

Jan further emphasizes the risk of simply labeling music as memetic because of its resemblance to other melodies. Memes are not limited to the parameters in his studies but is open to an almost limitless number of interpretations,³⁰⁴ and this open-endedness has the potential of all musical ideas to be derivative. Oral tradition has the capacity to get stories wrong, folk song traditions only have the capacity to spread as far as their audience distributes it, and musical material cannot hold the same implications between every human being.

³⁰⁰ Weissman, *Talkin’ bout a Revolution*, 322.

³⁰¹ Lorts, “Black Laughter/Black Protest,” 165-178.

³⁰² Weissman, *Talkin’ bout a Revolution*, 298.

³⁰³ Cray, *The Erotic Muse*, 157.

³⁰⁴ Jan, *The Memetics of Music*, 79.

Other questions to consider: Is Tom Lehrer's music worth repeating? Is Tom Lehrer's music speaking to us as performers and audiences now? What memes are worth spreading, especially when concrete and critical views on ideas about society and politics cannot be reduced to a meme? What makes a meme a compelling, if incomplete, idea? How seriously to take ideas is the basis for academic and intellectual conversation.³⁰⁵ Despite all appearances, Lehrer's music is just academic enough to be taken seriously enough for further interpretation.

And now, at long last, the final thoughts. Tom Lehrer's music gives audiences and musicians an opportunity to consume memes and process them using musical language. Music as an additional dimension to literary interpretation allows for a songwriter to say more with a musical meme while maintaining the integrity of a poem or set of lyrics. The task remains for the musician to take this task of listening seriously and apply memetics into future performances.

Learning about how music moves us is not just for companies and executives to exploit for profit and acquiring business through commercials and background noise. Nor is it for an elite few who reserve the people, places, and spaces to make specific music possible. Music, if understood with context and a little irony, has the potential to reflect social change, represent alternative populations,³⁰⁶ and codify ideas into a pattern of poetry through sound. Doing so through laughter allows humans to use their brains to think to the abstract and consider new ways of learning about music. It seems to be more than a coincidence, then, that the Germanic root for Tom Lehrer's surname derives from the word "teacher." May this project teach something of how musicians can learn about seriously singing funny songs.

³⁰⁵ Thomerson, "Parody," 7.

³⁰⁶ Weissman, *Talkin' 'bout a Revolution*, 229.

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