

*Lyrics have the same forms as the music<sup>1</sup> -- but which comes first: the music or the lyric?*

Usually -- the idea.

What follows depends entirely on the method of collaboration, even if the collaborator is yourself as a Composer-Lyricist. Sometimes a lyric will burst forth completely or nearly formed and just vomit itself onto your page. That is a blessing. Many times a lyric is constructed, shaped and moulded like a mini-play. Then you compose the music to it. Often times, a Lyricist is handed music, or music is played for him or her (sometimes over and over again) until he/she finds the rhythm and meter of the song. Then there are those instances where a bit of music or a bit of lyric begins the process followed by a bit more of lyric or a bit more of music and the song is created in total collaboration with both writers in one room in perfect sync (or not)! I have also conducted writing sessions over the phone and over Skype or some other synced platform, and it works just as well. Most lyricists and composers work in different ways depending on the song. Let it flow as it will.

If you are a Composer-Lyricist, all of these methods of writing can still happen. I've been there and done that with even more than I have put in this document. However, if your stated craft for this show is as a Lyric Writer, stick to it and don't try to compose. If you are a Composer, don't try to write the lyric. Now, re-writing what has been written, by composer or lyricist, is also what collaboration is all about, as you discover the germ of the song you have set about to create. A pre-composed melody may need an extra syllable for the lyricist, or may need the drop of a syllable here and there to accommodate the other's idea. Be flexible, if you can. A pre-written lyric needs to also be flexible, in that words may be omitted or added to what you wrote out of need for the construction of the music. Music seems much less flexible as we must fill the beats of each measure in a mathematically satisfying way. The play, and the over-arching purpose of the song, is what should control what is done at all times. Remember also, Playwrighting is re-writing. This applies to lyrics. We cannot escape it.

## CAUTION:

As a Composer, I have surprised many a lyric writer with the melody of a song that wasn't what they heard in their heads, but still fits the moment of the song well. And they love it. Or they grow to. Don't be married to your meter if you heard the song in 4/4 and it comes out in 3/4 or 6/8. A composer has the job of creating a musical program that has variety in it. The lyricist is secondary in that instance, but has been primary in the creation of the lyric and its future song form. Sometimes the music must take precedence.

A theatrical Lyric usually tells a story, so, it must be created just like a play -- with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Sometimes that story is merely a feeling, a thought, a list of items to act upon, or a plan to get what a character wants/needs. Sometimes it is a full story necessary for the understanding of either the over-all story we are in or the character who is singing at the time, in that moment.

A fine lyric, according to Lehman Engel, a Dean of Musical Theatre, is comprised of "images that are fresh and precise. Generalizations achieve no effect and are the hallmark of amateurs."

**WORDS. WORDS. WORDS. WORDS.** Choose the correct ones.

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<sup>1</sup> read, "Musical Theatre: The Craft of Composing Music" -- another blog title on our site.

Theatrical lyrics are identified by several common characteristics: they tell a story, they reveal character, they support and extend dramatic action, and they have PERFECT RHYMES. A theatre lyric is generally much more inventive than its 'pop' counterparts, with their near rhymes and less-complicated meters and rhythms. This is because a theatre lyric must do MORE than a pop lyric. [In my opinion, while the songs to SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS THE MUSICAL were fun to listen to, the show could not sustain an audience with the 'pop' form of the lyrics (and sometimes the melodies) of each song. Hence, the show closed early -- no matter how delightful the performance, it was missing something.] If a theatrical lyric writer has learned his or her craft, he/she will be able to write to a rhyme and have that last rhyme payoff as the lyric stanza's button or cap. "Again" and Brain" do not rhyme just because they are spelled the same, unless, of course, your character is British, as in "The Rain In Spain" from MY FAIR LADY. But there, it is used for comic effect.

This, then, must give the theatrical lyricist pause, as there are only so many words that rhyme with 'love.'" Many other words have very few, and often-heard rhymes. Avoid them if you can. If you can't, use them in a new way, a surprising way. Each word is chosen carefully for its addition to the rhythm of the words, the inherent meter of certain words, (like Shakespeare and his 'iamb', 'trochee', 'dactyl', and the like) these are tools and can be misused if you are careless. Don't avoid made up words, or mashed together words (The Sherman Brothers come to mind on this one. They are masters at it!) The made up word can be such a surprise and a delight as it pops out of a performer's mouth, punctuating the punch line of a stanza.

Lyric writing is a craft. It is a most difficult one. For you must be storyteller, poet, psychologist, comic, and rhythm master all in one.

### CONSTRUCTION

I recently listened to a score that had the form of a limerick in every verse of nearly every song. But it worked. I was surprised. This created a pattern for the show, and you began to look for the limerick form within the lyric of each song and were satisfied when it appeared and you recognized it and laughed. That was the author's intent, I think. It was as if the lyric tricked you into paying attention, and you did, and the story unfolded more easily for you because of its delivery system.

**We generally create rhyming schemes. The most common is:**

A  
B  
A  
B

(Basically, rhyming couplets)

**But there are others:**

A  
A  
B  
B

A  
B  
C  
B  
A

**Even the limerick:**

A  
A  
B  
B  
A

This only scratches the surface. A rhyme scheme is whatever you create it to be, but it MUST be consistent within the song. Every time that section of the song is sung, the Rhyme scheme should also appear. It is a fascinating and achievable challenge. ALSO -- fill each beat of the meter each time that meter appears in the song. Don't drop out syllables because you haven't found the way to fill it. (Pop lyrics, again.)  
Something else to think about... Your song's ending. Do not be afraid to restructure both the lyric and the melody just a little to be able to create a 'tag' for a satisfying and surprising ending. A friend of mine just wrote a Christmas song, employing a theatrical lyric form of perfect rhymes, and the ending used a tag: four extra syllables were inserted into the meter and the song lifted to a new and unexpected height that was most satisfying. Whether this was written in the lyric, or requested by the music, it happened and was right on point.

**There are rhymes that don't just happen at the end of the lines. These are called interior rhymes:**

<sup>2</sup>PICTURE ME, BY THE SEA  
BASKING IN LUXURY  
SERVANTS AT MY CALL.  
COULD I BE, ON A SPREE?  
WANDERING ON AN ES-  
TATE WOULD BE ENTHRALLING.

(This gives a feminine ending to the last line, and calls attention to itself by that use.)

**There are some rhyme schemes employing a double quatrain, thusly:**

A  
A  
A  
C  
  
B  
B  
B  
C

The "C" becomes the surprise and therefore should be carefully and uniquely constructed, as the audience has heard an unattached rhyme in the first stanza and will be waiting for it to appear again. Surprise and delight them.

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<sup>2</sup> from AN ENCHANTED APRIL a musical by Elizabeth Hansen and C. Michael Perry © 2003, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2018 by the authors.

We lyricists may also use a chapter from the Actor's Canon of 'methods': Take the Risk, make the Risk as big as possible. Whether the character fulfills that Risk or not will tell you something about him or her, and about the show. An unachieved Risk can say several things: that the character was 'pie-in-the-sky-dreaming', or that they were incapable of that achievement, or that they were supremely confident (or at least hopeful), or that the lyricist was not in tune with the throughline of the play. Always present the Risk -- the payoff will surprise you as it heightens the 'drama' of the situation. I can guarantee you that when you find a way to have the character believably achieve that goal, surmount that obstacle, the resulting catharsis for characters and audiences will be electric.

As Sanford Meisner, a fine teacher of acting, said: "Find a way of doing it." That may sound simplistic, but it is not easy -- because the easy way is rarely, if ever, satisfying. He asks the actor (read lyricist here), to search out not just the why, but the how of character portrayal. As a playwright, working, of necessity, on a very small artistic canvas -- the lyric -- this is your principal task: to find a way of doing it, and make it strong and delightful. Hey, maybe a beneficial educational task is to take an acting class or two. Understand what an actor needs to work with, then give him or her those tools in your lyric.

There are as many forms for a lyric as there are ideas in your imagination. The biggest things about Lyric Writing require you to

- 1) tell story,
- 2) reveal character,
- 3) advance plot,
- 4) entertain,
- 5) use perfect rhymes,
- 6) inform.

Traditionally, perfect rhymes are requested in writing for the theatre, because once a rhyme is set up, the audience is listening for the rhyme and they want to be surprised each time they hear it. So take the risk and find new ways to surprise them.

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