Understanding American Popular Song: "Over the Rainbow"

In 1938, at the age of 16, child filmstar Judy Garland (1922–1969) was cast as Dorothy Gale in the Metro–Goldwyn–Mayer film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). It was the role of a lifetime for a young woman with a once-in-a-generation voice. The movie's signature song, "Over the Rainbow," by composer Harold Arlen (1905–1986) and lyricist E.Y. Harburg (1896–1981) became an American standard and one of the most recorded songs ever.

We close this chapter by analyzing two different "Rainbow" recordings. The first is Garland's original from the motion picture soundtrack. The second was recorded by jazz pianist Art Tatum (1909–1956). The performances, which could hardly be more different, give an idea of the interpretive range that skilled musicians bring to their work.

Judy Garland and Terry (Toto), 1939.

"Over the Rainbow," by Harold Arlen and E.Y. Harburg, performed by Judy Garland

Texture: Homophonic
Meter: Quadruple
Form: Strophic, 32-bar song form—AABA

We begin with the Garland version, not just because it came earlier, but also because it is by far the easier performance to understand. (We offer an audio version of the song on our website, but for context we suggest you find a film clip on the internet.) Listen to the first stanza (or verse) and its graceful melody, which begins with the inspirational upward leap of a full octave from "do" to "do" on the word "Somewhere." The leap echoes this Kansas farm-girl's dreams of the world she hopes someday to see. From there, the melody loops downward slightly, but finishes the line ("rainbow") back at the upper tonic. The second phrase ("Way up high") also begins on "do" but lacks the energy of the full octave leap. Instead it jumps to "la" before settling on "sol" (the scale's fifth degree) with the word "high." It seems that "high" is not so high after all, at least not as high as Dorothy's dreamy "Somewhere."

The pause on "sol" is structurally important. It sets up a downward near-octave fall from one phrase to the next—that is, from the word "high" to "There's" on the pitch "la" below the opening "do." With that tone Arlen has given the limits of the song's melodic frame, nearly an octave and one-half. Also notice the symmetry—the leap upward to the song's highest note has been balanced by a fall downward to its lowest note. With the final syllable of "lullaby" the melody ends back home, on the same pitch that it began.

What about the accompaniment? Soft tones from orchestral strings and winds contribute to the dreamy atmosphere. There are no stark lines; there is little sense of meter. Counter melodies enhance Garlard's singing.

"Somewhere …"	Stanza 1 (A)
"Somewhere …"	Stanza 2 (A)
"Someday I'll wish … "	Stanza 3 (B)
"Somewhere … "	Stanza 4 (A)
Coda	

Find the complete lyrics on the internet and take notice of Harburg's equally well-crafted words. Stanzas one, two, and four begin the same, with the line "Somewhere over the Rainbow." All three stanzas also rhyme lines two and four (high/lullaby, blue/true, fly/I) creating a rhyme scheme of ABCB. Notice also that stanza four returns to the long "i" vowel rhymes of stanza one, yet another one of the song's many symbols of returning home.

Contrast stanzas one, two, and four with stanza three, which is the odd one out. Here the words come faster and the rhymes are more complex. The opening line's closing word "star" is rhymed with an interior word "far" in the following line. This allows Harburg to complete the rhyme scheme with "me," "drops"/"tops," and finally returning to "me," thus creating a stanza rhyme scheme of A(A)BCCB.

You have probably noticed that stanzas one, two, and four all have the same melody and that stanza three is different. Building from this we can analyze the large-scale melodic material of the four stanzas as fitting a model of AABA.

Now, listen to the song again and conduct time (four beats to each measure) along with the melody. If you follow through the entire song, you will notice that all four stanzas are exactly the same length—eight complete measures. Your beats should fall in the following places:

Some …	(beats 1 and 2), (beats 3 and 4) *where* …	measure 1
Over …	(beats 1 and 2), *rain* (beats 3 and 4) …	measure 2
Way …	(beats 1 and 2), *up* (beats 3 and 4) …	measure 3
High …	(beats 1 through 4)	measure 4

Finally, we are in a position to give the song's structure a name. It is 32-bar song form, consisting of four equal-sized sections of eight measures in the melodic framework of AABA. Many thousands of songs have been written in this form, from 19th-century art songs to rhythm and blues.

Perhaps you noticed that the song's final two lines break the 32-bar pattern. These closing lines are an optional addition to the form, called a coda ("tail"). If a performer were to expand on the general 32-bar form, perhaps with improvisation or by adding additional stanzas, the coda would not be played until song's end.

What other things might you choose to listen for? We suggest you listen to Garland's voice, to the way she inflects the melody, to her use of vibrato, and to the general

character of her voice. Is she convincing in her delivery? Does she sound like a young girl?

Art Tatum

Burdened with near blindness from early childhood but blessed with perfect pitch, pianist Art Tatum was an iconic and controversial figure in the world of jazz. Fans and fellow musicians found his vivid and eclectic musical imagination unsurpassed. So too were his technical skills. No jazz pianist, before or since, has gotten around the piano keyboard with a more formidable combination of spontaneity, power and lightness, speed and groove. Curiously, Tatum's critics found fault with the same qualities his supporters admired. They found his imagination rich, but undisciplined, and his technical facility so highlighted as to overwhelm the music itself. Although these controversies continue, today Tatum's large catalog of recordings, the vast majority done on a single take, serves as a sonic textbook for both aspiring and well-established musicians.

Art Tatum, Rochester, NY, May 19, 1946.
Photo by William P. Gottlieb/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division [LC-GLB13-0831]

A child prodigy, Tatum was born and raised in Toledo, Ohio. And like so many successful black American musicians, he grew up in the shadow of the church. Both parents were musically involved at Toledo's Grace Presbyterian Church, where his mother was the pianist. Tatum learned to improvise on church hymns while still a small boy. Elsewhere, he received formal instruction in classical music, the results of which can be heard in his penchant for lightning-fast melodic runs, tempo shifts, and complex harmonies—qualities also central to the music of Europe's 19th-century virtuoso pianist/composers, such as Frédéric Chopin (1810–1848) and Franz Liszt (1811–1886).

However strong Tatum's early attraction to classic music may have been (he often improvised on classical melodies), those sounds could not offer a career path for an African American in the 1920s. Jazz did. While still in his teens, Tatum got his own radio show. He was also a regular performer, often with Jon Hendricks, at the Waiters and Bellman's Club, a "black and tan" (i.e. racially integrated) nightclub that formed the heart of Toledo's then vital jazz scene. Tatum moved to New York City in the early 1930s where he spent much of the rest of his brief life.

Stylistically, Tatum's music is hard to categorize. He performed mostly as a soloist. (Perhaps describing him as a one-man band is most accurate.) Playing alone allowed Tatum the freedom to give his musical eccentricities full range. Though he began his career as a "stride" pianist (a style in which the left hand moves between bass line and chords) and he could "swing" as well as anyone, Tatum often abandoned stride's muscularity to insert lush chords and idiosyncratic runs. While he occasionally played the blues (Chapter 5: Music and Ethnicity), the pianist seemed most at home with the more intricate harmonies characteristic of the American Songbook, music drawn from musical theater and film and Tin Pan Alley, the one-time center of the New York City songwriting industry.

> "I used to close my eyes when we worked together, thinking that maybe if I couldn't see, I might learn to hear like Art."
>
> —jazz vocalist Jon Hendricks (b.1921–2017)

"Over the Rainbow," performed by Art Tatum (1939)

LISTENING 3.4 GUIDE

"Over the Rainbow" is an American Songbook classic, of course. It was also a staple in Tatum's repertoire. He recorded the song on multiple occasions, each time differently. The first surviving recording comes from a live radio broadcast made just six weeks after the movie was released. This is the least complex of the various available recordings, and the one we will examine.

First, listen to the recording all the way through. So thick are the textures and so extravagant the melodic additions and harmonic alterations that the first time through you may feel rather overwhelmed, if not altogether lost. Keep the original melody in mind and try to follow the AABA form.

0:00	Introduction
0:07	First stanza (A)

The performance begins with introductory sounds (perhaps raindrops?). Tatum then plays the song's melody ("Somewhere, over the rainbow … "). The song's original harmonies are embellished and the rhythmic movement is jagged—pushing forward, then falling back. (Tatum's melodic imagination disguises this, but the rhythmic instability will become apparent if you attempt to conduct time.) For Tatum, however, the line "Way up high" seems to have demanded a melodic response in the downward run, which is greatly embellished. The original melody is obscured under Tatum's improvisatory filigree. Notice how Tatum rushes through the final words of the stanza ("Once in a lullaby").

0:23	Second stanza (A)
	The same basic strategy is followed for stanza two (A).
0:36	Third stanza (B)
	In the B stanza ("Someday I'll wish…"), Tatum's improvisatory abstractions virtually subsume the original melody. Exotic harmonies are introduced; the tempo rushes forward only to pull back a moment later. Try to find the melody tones. Most of them are there, but they are hidden inside thick chords and sometimes displaced across octaves.
0:57	Fourth stanza (A)
	Stanza four (A) begins with the same stop and start rhythmic feel, but halfway through (at 1:10), he switches to a rhythmically stable stride style with the left hand keeping strict time and the right hand embellishing the melody.
1:18	First stanza (A)
1:37	Second stanza (A)

	Tatum briefly fragments the melody with isolated tones, like points in space. The sounds are abstract, almost mathematical.
1:57	Third stanza (B)
	Tatum drops the stride for the first half of the section, then returns to stride style.
2:17	Fourth stanza (A)
	Notice how the music becomes a bit more abstract with each stanza.
2:36	First stanza (A)
2:58	Second stanza (A)
3:16	Third stanza (B)
	Pulsing chords
3:34	Fourth stanza (A)
	Tatum interrupts the B section with a wild drive to song's end.

Tatum's performance is fresh and nonchalant, almost conversational. He is as comfortable improvising music as we are talking with a best friend. Almost all of Tatum's recordings were made on a single take. He sometimes recorded dozens of tracks in a single day.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- Which performance, Garland's or Tatum's, do you prefer? Why?
- What does your choice suggest about your musical tastes?
- Might your choice reflect your cultural background?
- How does social context affect a performance? Give examples.
- What constitutes creativity in musical performance? Does a performer need to improvise to be creative?
- Can musical elements (melody, harmony, rhythm, etc.) be compared to other fundamental building blocks in the visual arts or literature?
- Bach and Tatum were both virtuoso improvisers. Imagine a musical meeting between the two. What would it be like?

ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS

- Pick a piece of music you know well. Map the form and label the musical elements that distinguish each part.
- Find two pieces of music that express opposing emotions. Identify how the musical elements are used to create the mood.
- Listen on the internet to all four Tatum recordings (1929, 1948, 1953, 1956) of "Over the Rainbow." How are they similar? Different? Do you have a favorite? If so, why?
- Find still more recordings of "Over the Rainbow." What values does each reflect? Which do you enjoy the most? Why?

Conclusion

We have seen that while musical compositions may be extremely complex in the aggregate, they are built from many separate, and relatively simple, elements. By investigating these elements individually through careful listening and thoughtful analysis, even highly intricate music becomes understandable.

In the following chapters we will look at many different kinds of music. We will explore the technical make-up of representative works in order to understand how they were conceived and composed. We will also study how music reflects and influences the social world in which it is created and performed. We will learn that musical sounds and functions vary considerably according to time and place, social identity, and aesthetics. Finally, we will come to understand how exploring our musical world offers rich insights into the human condition.

Key Terms

- 32-bar song form
- American Songbook
- bourrée
- coda
- fugue
- gagaku
- grace note
- harpsichord
- komibuki
- pentatonic scale
- shakuhachi
- stride piano
- suite
- suizen
- Tin Pan Alley