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Abstract: The song "Iowa Stubborn" from *The Music Man* provides a key to understanding the development and musical content of the work. Willson's "Iowa Stubborn" insistence on the organic development of songs from the narrative led him to use experimental techniques like "speak-song" and "words-without-songs," some of which were by-products of his long career in radio. By creating a dialogic style of song based on stubborn pitch repetition and a small number of motives, the composer, who by the early 1950s was Iowa's most famous son, was able to characterize the stubborn natives of the Hawkeye both musically and lyrically, in numerous numbers in the score.

Text of paper:

Iowa Stubborn: Meredith Willson's Musical Characterization of his Fellow Iowans

Roberta Schwartz

As a native, I can tell you that Iowans have a special reverence for *The Music Man*. It's not because it's set in Iowa; we don't feel the same way about Rogers and Hammerstein's *State Fair*, which also takes place in Iowa. It is because we recognize ourselves in the characters. Though Meredith Willson always thought of the musical as a valentine to his native state, albeit one that did not idealize its inhabitants: "Some Iowans who have seen *The Music Man* in rehearsal have called it an Iowan's attempt to pay tribute to his home state. I'm glad they feel that way because that's what I meant it to be even though I didn't try to rose-color up our Iowa-stubborn ways" (Willson 1959: 16). We would probably feel differently about the musical if he had.

Iowans have a reputation for being stubborn, pragmatic, direct, and sometimes contrary. Perhaps it is a result of the state's agrarian roots; farmers have little choice but to confront unexpected conditions and nonetheless draw subsistence from the land. Though the state is blessed with rich soil and plentiful water, the weather (as Willson points out) is harsh - insufferably hot and humid in the summer and often frigid in winter - yet our relatives remained instead of seeking more moderate climates. Maybe it is because Iowa was settled largely by German, Scottish, Irish, and Bohemian immigrants, ethnic groups that have their own reputations for intractability.

It may seem odd, but natives embrace these traits as a treasured part of their identity, behavioral quirks that establish a sense of statehood and unity. Besides, Iowa stubbornness can be an asset. It might, for example, lead someone to spend six years producing 40 drafts of a musical based on his childhood memories. It also explains a great deal about the genesis of *The Music Man*, as well as the plot, the dialogue, and even the music.

As the musical has received almost no scholarly attention, the primary sources for studying *The Music Man* are the book, lyrics, and the statements of the composer. Fortunately these are plentiful, as Willson wrote three autobiographies; the last, *But He Doesn't Know the Territory*, focuses on the odyssey to make *The Music Man* a reality.

In the text Willson explains the inception of the musical. "In 1949 a couple people including Frank Loesser said, 'I think you ought to write a musical comedy about Iowa.' I thought it was a good idea and I wanted very much to do it but I refused, just to keep my neck bowed, in the typical posture of irrefragability that is the normal Iowa response to any suggestion of any nature whatsoever....Nobody brought it up anymore for some time, and I began to think they thought I couldn't do it. So, of course, I had to give it a try" (Willson 1959: 16).

People suggested Willson write a musical set in Iowa because by the late 1940s his identity and the Hawkeye state were indelibly linked. After a decade playing flute in prestigious organizations like the John Philip Sousa band (1921-23) and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra (1924-28), Willson began a successful career in radio, serving as the orchestral director for programs on the NBC network. The composer was affable and garrulous and proved comfortable engaging in on-air banter. By 1938 he was playing bit parts in comedy sketches, assuming the persona of a naïve Iowa boy 'making good;' audiences responded warmly to his down-home characterization and his stubborn habit of mentioning his home state whenever possible. After a stint at Armed Forces Radio he was asked by George Burns to serve as musical director and bit player on the Burns and Allen show, where Willson's assumed lack of sophistication served as complement to Allen's dizzy dame.

He continued his Iowa- related routines on *The Big Show*, much to the affected chagrin of host Tallulah Bankhead.

Willson: I've always been one of your greatest admirers, Mr. [Bob] Hope. I used to see all your pictures back in Mason City. I was born there, ya know. That's my home town. Mason City Iowa.

Bankhead: Meredith, you are not going to tell one of those *repugnant* stories about that *obscure* little hamlet of yours, are you?

Willson: Oh, glad you asked me. Well sir, Miss Bankhead, I used to see every one of Mr. Hope's pictures back in Mason City, Iowa. I remember going to the movie one night and I had to take standing room.

Hope: I know, boy, my pictures sell out all over.

Willson: No, it wasn't that, I had a sacroiliac, I had to stand up. (The Big Show: NBC 17 December 1950)

His simple Iowan act was so convincing that some were surprised when he appeared on television for the first time:

I was prepared for a Slim Summerville type. You know, a plain chap from the plains, brow wet with honest sweat. He'd be forever leaning against the lamp post (or maybe sittin' on the cracker barrel down at the gen'l store) chewing a wisp of straw and telling interminable tales, all beginning, "When I was a boy back in Mason City, Iowa..." but no, Mr. Willson is well-tailored, clean-shaven and altogether a man of the world (Willson, 1955: 121-2).

While anecdotes of his youth came to him easily, writing *The Music Man* proved rather more difficult. By his own admission, his stubborn nature slowed his work considerably. However, that intractability led to the show's most innovative and effective qualities.

One of the most striking features of *The Music Man* is the contrapuntal juxtaposition of songs: "Lida Rose" and "Will I Ever Tell You"; "Good Night Ladies" and "Pick-a-Little, Talk-A-Little"; "The Sadder But Wiser Girl" and "My White Night" (which Willson wrote as contrapuntally compatible but separated in the final version of the score); and "Seventy-Six Trombones" and "Goodnight, My Someone." The last are skillfully used to define the characters of Marian and Harold and demonstrate the changes each brings upon the other. This effective and touching device was not in Willson's original plan; it was the result of Iowa stubbornness. "Seventy-Six Trombones" was the first piece written for the show, but Willson had an unusual problem: "I liked the melody...except it seemed to be as good as a waltz as it was a march. The more I tried to do something with this nutty circumstance – or drop it, for that matter – the more baffled I became. Like trying to take off a pair of flypaper pajamas...After all, I didn't want to lose a march, I wanted to gain a waltz." He decided to use both, but didn't initially know what to do with the ballad; it was only in trying to justify stubbornly using the same melody twice that he stumbled upon the idea. "Maybe it would be interesting if these two could subtly convey to the audience the characteristic [loneliness] they had in common by separate renderings of the same song" (Willson 1959: 65).

The Music Man makes extensive use of recitative-like, rhythmicized speech, which Willson called, for lack of a better term, "speak-songs." The composer had a notion that in a musical comedy the songs should organically grow out of the dialogue. Moreover, he wanted to "write the dang songs as dialogue. Without rhymes. People don't talk in rhyme." Ernie Martin and Cy Feuer tried to convince him that audiences understood that characters in musicals sang and that songs rhymed, but Willson dug in his heels. "I was really getting Iowa-stubborn about the talking-rhymeless-rhythm songs as being the way I was determined to bridge dialogue and song..." (Willson 1959: 50)

Willson already knew how effective his speak-songs could be. In 1946 he thought of an innovative way to use the vocal quartet that performed on his CBS radio show, The Ford Music Room. "I suddenly thought maybe they could also do some unison speaking in the commercials – sort of a Greek chorus style..." He soon realized this was easier said than done; even copious rehearsals didn't yield true synchronization. Then he thought of writing out the parts in rhythmic notation, like that used for percussionists:

Figure 1. Meredith Willson's Talking People Notation



"It worked, and just reading the stuff off the paper like that, the "casual" quality began to come through..." (Willson 1949: 247) His speak-song ensemble, The Talking People, became a sensation; their best known commercial, for Jell-O, won an award for the best advertising gimmick of the year. While the device bears a resemblance (especially on paper) to Englebert Humperdinck's *Sprechgesang* and the *Sprechtstimme* of Arnold Schoenberg, it differs from both in that speak-song is not pitched; it is speaking in rhythm. Performers often apply the vocal inflections of everyday speech, but these are not dictated by the composer.

The purest examples of speak-song in *The Music Man* are the opening number, "Rock Island;" most of "Ya Got Trouble;" and the introduction to "Seventy-Six Trombones." The first, a staggeringly innovative piece of rhythmic speech, marries expository dialogue to the rhythm of a train picking up speed:

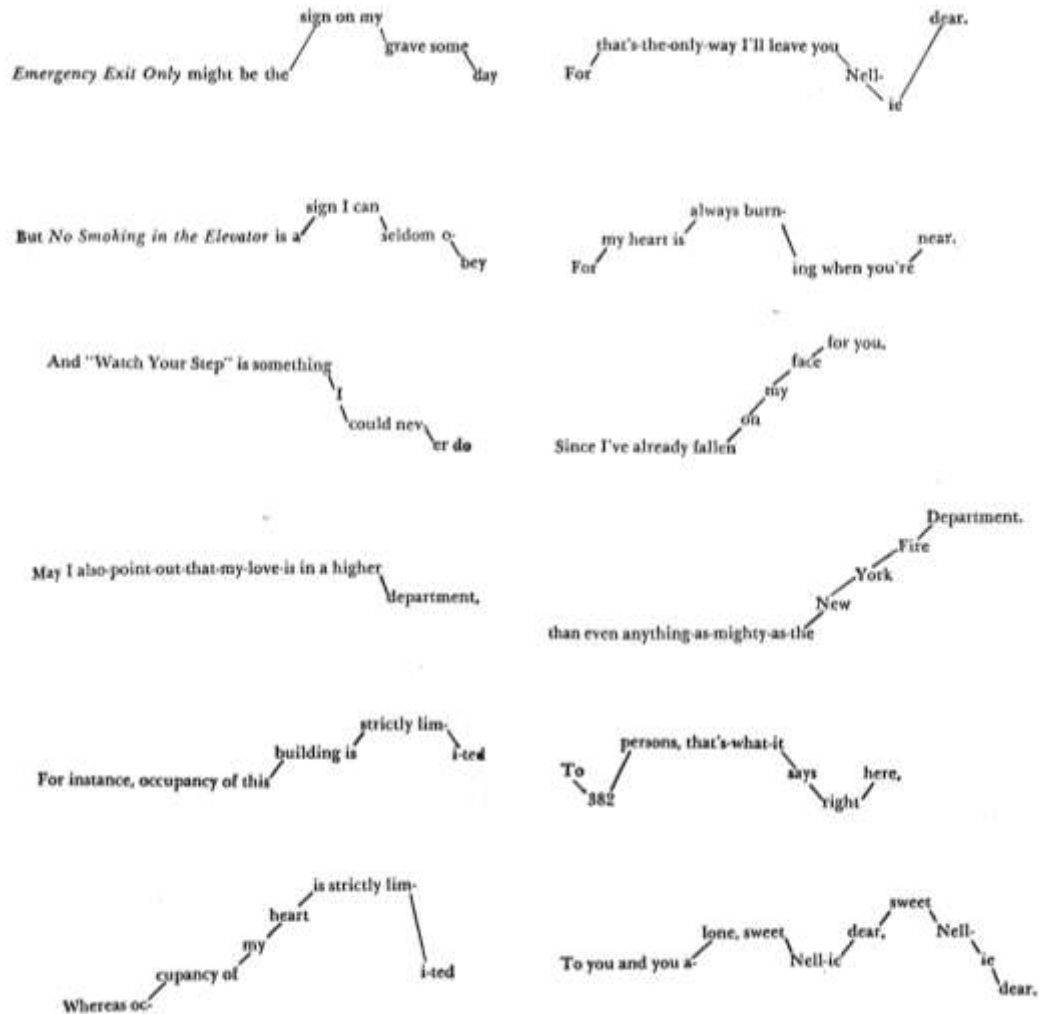
Figure 2. "Rock Island," mm. 1-12

The figure displays four staves of musical notation in bass clef, illustrating the rhythmic speech of the song "Rock Island." Each staff consists of a five-line staff with a treble clef and a common time signature. The notes are represented by 'x' marks on the staff lines, indicating the rhythm of the speech. Below each staff, the corresponding lyrics are written, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across notes. The lyrics are: "Cash for the mer - chan - dise. Cash for the but - ton hooks. Cash for the cot - ton goods. Cash for the hard goods. Cash for the soft goods. Cash for the fan - cy goods. Cash for the nog - gins and the pig - gins and the fir - kins. Cash for the hogs - head cask and dem - i - john. Cash for the crack - ers and the pick - les and the fly - pap - er."

Speak-song proved to be such an effective way of bridging dialogue and song that several musical numbers slip back and forth between the two: in "The Piano Lesson," rhythmicized clauses mark the transition from one speak-singer to another. "The Sadder but Wiser Girl" opens with speak song and drops back into it several more times, when the Professor is being particularly emphatic; apparently, Willson didn't find sung declaratives particularly plausible. "Pick-a-Little, Talk-A Little" and its reprise also include speak-song, most prominently the gossipy condemnation of Marian's "brazen overtures."

Willson extended the quality of the speak-songs to other numbers in *The Music Man* with a related technique that he dubbed "word-without-song," something more akin to *Sprechstimme*. In 1953, he began contemplating combining music and poetry in a way that didn't require singing, for the benefit of the musically challenged. "Shouldn't they have some way to release their musical feelings, like everybody else?... Even if these limited people can't sing they can speak, can't they? And in changing inflections. Both high and low." (Willson 1959: 134) His first "words-without-song" experiment was a "spoken song ballad."

Figure 3. "Occupancy of this Building is Limited to 382 Persons" (Willson 1959: 74-9)



“The Piano Lesson” and “If You Don’t Mind Me Saying So” are cut from the same cloth, but due to the central conceit of a standard fingering exercise the pitch palate is larger. The context of the piano lesson also provides a reason for Marian and her mother to be singing, or not-singing, as the case may be.

Figure 4. “If You Don’t Mind Me Saying So,” mm. 37-47

Mrs. Paroo

I know all a-bout your stand-ards, and if you don't mind me say-in' so, there's

not a man a-live who could hope to meas-ure up to that blend a' Paul Bun-yan Saint

Pat and No-ah Web-ster you've con-coc-ted for your-self out a' your

I-rish im-a-gin-a-tion, your I-o-wa stub-born-nes, and your li-ber-ry full a' books!

During his compositional odyssey, Willson wrote a number of similar “experimental rhythm poems...trying to find ways of substituting rhythm for rhyme. The test was to add a musical accompaniment: with an accompaniment the “poems” should turn into satisfactory song-without accompaniment they should remain satisfactory dialogue.” (Willson 1959: 134)

Willson, in the end, didn’t avoid rhymes. Every song in *The Music Man*, save for “If You Don’t Mind Me Sayin’ So,” rhymes in some fashion; most even employ conventional end rhyme. However, the composer softens the effect by making extensive use of assonance (“we can be cold as a falling thermometer in December if you ask about our weather in July”) alliteration, internal rhyme, cross rhyme (“Who’s gonna patronize a little bitty two-by-four kind of store anymore?”) and irregular phrase lengths. What Willson does reject is meter. Most of the lyrics are non-metrical; the rhythm is dictated by the normal spoken accent of the words. This ensures that even songs with conventional rhyme schemes don’t sound poetic or artificial.

I posit that Willson’s stubborn efforts to emphasize rhythm over rhyme and to create songs with the quality of dialogue were driven by a desire to make the “River-citezians” in *The Music Man* sound like Iowans. Willson thought it important, as he explained his misuse of certain words as a reflection of the way he actually spoke. “That’s no more than just being ordinarily truthful” (Willson, 1959: 3). As Iowans do not have a distinct regional accent, Willson used other means to characterize his fellow Hawkeyes.

What initially got me thinking about this subject was the song "Iowa Stubborn." Lyrically, the song is an incredibly astute portrayal of the Iowan temperament, but the characterization extends beyond the words. The music itself is stubborn: the incessant repetition of a small number of musical and rhythmic motives creates a piece that seems as intractable as the folks who sing it. The melody contains five basic gestures: 1) descending minor seconds, 2) descending thirds, 3) scale fragments outlining a) ascending thirds and b) descending fourths, sometimes combined into longer sequences, and 4) ascending leaps of a sixth. It is just as tightly circumscribed rhythmically: eighth note triplets, strings of evenly articulated eighth notes, and dotted eighth-sixteenth note pairs dominate. The end result is a musical number that retains some quality of spoken dialogue.

Figure 5. Iowa Stubborn, mm. 10-25

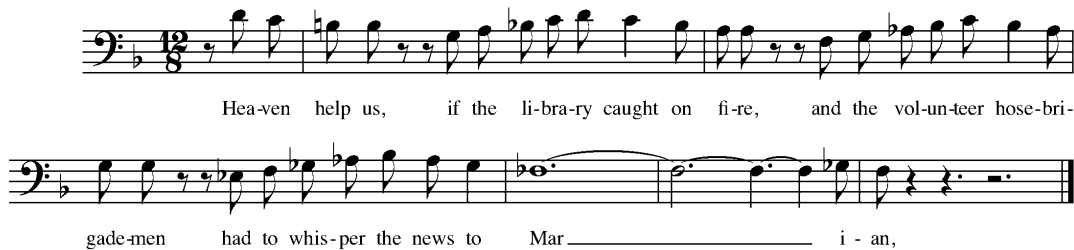
We can be cold as our fall - ing ther - mo - me - ter in Dec - em - ber, if you
ask a - bout our weath - er in Ju - ly and we're so by God stub - born, we can
stand touch - ing no - ses for a week at a time and ne - ver see eye to eye ____ But what the
heck! You're wel - come, join us at the pic - nic. You ____ can have your fill of all the
food you bring your - self. You real - ly ought to give I - o - wa ____ a try

"Pick-a-Little, Talk-a-Little" involves extensive pitch repetition, as well as the same descending thirds and scale fragments. "The Wells Fargo Wagon" employs a different collection of motives - outlined triads, major seconds and fifths - but is also tightly unified, as is "Shipooopi." All four songs, which might be described as dialogic, have something in common: they are ensemble numbers for the people of River City.

Slightly more than half of the vocal numbers in *The Music Man* (see appendix) reflect the contemporary conventions of the American musical. Some of these are specialty songs, written to meet the conventions of their genre: the patriotic hymn "Columbia, Gem of the Ocean," the barbershop quartet numbers and the body of "Seventy-Six Trombones," a perfect Sousa march.

The other purely conventional numbers are sung by Marian, whose education, inheritance and marital status isolate her from the rest of the community. By contrast, the songs of the two real “outsiders” – Marcellus and Harold Hill – are not standard musical fare. “Shipoopee” makes it clear that Marcellus, Hill’s former partner, has changed his ways and settled down: musically, he’s an Iowan. The professor is a more interesting case. His only conventional number is “Seventy-Six Trombones.” One might expect that his bid for Marian’s affections would be conventional as well, as it is one outsider addressing another, but that is true of only half the song; the rest is dialogic:

Figure 6. “Marian the Librarian,” mm. 15-20



The image shows a musical score for the song "Marian the Librarian" from measures 15 to 20. It consists of two staves of music in bass clef with a 12/8 time signature. The lyrics are: "Hea-ven help us, if the li-bra-ry caught on fi-re, and the vol-un-teer hose-bri-gade-men had to whis-per the news to Mar _____ i - an,". The melody is characterized by a fast, rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes.

It is not surprising that the fast talking salesman can’t be constrained by lyricism, but in “The Sadder but Wiser Girl for Me” he can’t even stick to singing; much of the piece is speak-song.

His tour-de-force is “Ya Got Trouble,” where Harold needs to be a concerned outsider pointing out the “caliber of disaster” presented by the pool hall while effectively illustrating those dangers for the people of River City. Hill also does a convincing job of communicating with the people of River City in their own language: “Ya Got Trouble” is almost entirely speak-song; the only pitch content mirrors that of “Iowa Stubborn”: scalar fragments outlining ascending thirds and descending fifths, and descending leaps of a third.

Figure 7. "Ya Got Trouble," mm. 163-174

Re-mem-ber the Maine, Ply - mouth Rock, and the Gold-en Rule. Our child-ren's
Our child-ren's
Our child-ren's
child - ren gon-na have trou-ble. Oh, we got trou-ble We're in
child - ren gon-na have trou-ble, trou - ble, trou-ble, trou-ble
child - ren gon-na have trou-ble trou - ble trou-ble trou-ble
ter - ri - ble, ter - ri - ble trou-ble. That game with the fif - teen num-bered balls -
trou-ble trou-ble trou-ble trou-ble trou-ble trou - ble
trou-ble trou-ble trou-ble trou-ble trou-ble trou-ble
- is the dev - il's tool!
trou - ble trou - ble trou - ble! Dev - il's tool!
trou - ble trou - ble trou - ble! Dev - il's tool!

In the end, Harold Hill proves he does know something of the territory, particularly the musical landscape crafted by Meredith Willson to characterize his fellow Iowans.

Appendix: Vocal Numbers in *The Music Man* (reprises omitted)

Act I		
Title	Description	Character(s)
“Rock Island”	speaking-song	salesmen on train
“Iowa Stubborn”	dialogic	citizens of River City
“Ya Got Trouble”	speaking song	Harold Hill, citizens
“If You Don’t Mind My Sayin’ So”	words-without-song	Marian and Mrs. Paroo
“Goodnight, My Someone”	conventional	Marian
“Columbia, Gem of the Ocean”	conventional (specialty)	citizens of River City
“Seventy-Six Trombones”	speaking-song, conventional (specialty)	Harold Hill, citizens
“Sincere”	conventional (specialty)	school board
“The Sadder But Wiser Girl	speaking-song, dialogic	Harold Hill
“Pick-A-Little, Talk-A-Little”	speaking-song, dialogic	ladies of River City
“Good Night Ladies”	conventional (specialty)	school board
“Marian the Librarian”	conventional, dialogic	Harold Hill
“My White Knight”	conventional	Marian
“Wells Fargo Wagon”	dialogic	citizens of River City
Act II		
“It’s You”	conventional (specialty)	school board
“Shipooopi”	dialogic	Marcellus
“Lida Rose”	conventional (specialty)	school board
“Will I Ever Tell You”	conventional	Marian
“Gary Indiana”	dialogic	Winthrop
“Till There Was You”	conventional (specialty)	Marian

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