

“Someone To Watch Over Me”
George and Ira Gershwin
David Mitchell

The text and music to “Someone To Watch Over Me” by Ira and George Gershwin were originally written to underscore the feelings of Kay, the main character in *Oh, Kay*, at a pivotal moment in the musical, which premiered on November 8, 1926. George Gershwin’s music heightens the emotional impact of Ira’s words and thus this important moment in the play. George uses melody, rhythm, and harmony to emphasize important words and heighten the emotional impact of Ira’s text in “Someone To Watch Over Me.” Consequently, a careful study of: context of the song, rhyme scheme, important words, melodic shape, chord progressions, and rhythm helps the performer deliver a better-informed performance of this song.

This paper will first give a synopsis of the scene from *Oh, Kay* that “Someone To Watch Over Me” was originally written for. Then it will tackle each section of the piece in order: introduction, verse, transition, A and A1 of the chorus, bridge or B section, and return of A in the chorus.

A synopsis of the scene in which Kay sings “Someone To Watch Over Me” is: A Kay is trying to steal away Jimmy from Constance, his fiancée, just before they are to be married. Jimmy’s bootlegger friend, Shorty, finds Kay in an evening dress just before she attempts to “wow” Jimmy and steal him away from Constance. At this pivotal moment, Kay sings “Someone To Watch Over Me” to Shorty. The lyrics spell out her feelings about Jimmy: love, loneliness, regret, her intentions, her hopes, and how she has been longing to find someone like Jimmy to watch over her.

To analyze the piano introduction, it is helpful to understand the construction of

the A section of the verse. The A section, measure 5-12, is a tight-knit eight measure sentence structure. This phrase could be an example of 18th century sentence structure in Caplin's *Classical Form*. Measures 5-8 are a statement and response in the subdominant. Measures 9-12 are a continuation and cadential idea that finishes with an opening ended half cadence that propels the piece forward into the repetition of the A section in measures 13-19. The piano introduction is a fragment of the continuation and cadential idea in measures 10-11. It contains the same rhythmic pattern with slightly altered accompaniment and intervallic content; therefore, the piano introduction is borrowed from measures 10-11 of the verse. In this piece, the piano does not have an independent theme of its own. It mostly borrows from and doubles the vocal melody.

In the verse, the melodic notes that correspond to the end rhyming words are very important. The rhyme scheme of the verse is ababbcdcddee. For example, words "old" and "told" from rhyme scheme a both occur on melodic note G in measures 5 and 7. This ties these two words together melodically as well as grammatically. The same pattern occurs in measures 13 and 15 on word "everywhere" and "affair". This creates a sense of continuity in the rhyme scheme.

Rhyme schemes b and d are even more significant than rhyme scheme a. In rhyme scheme b, the words blind, find, and mind occur on melodic notes that create an ascending melodic line. For example, the word "blind" occurs on note G in measure 6. The word "find" occurs on note A in measure 8. The word "mind" occurs on note B flat in measure 12. Together, these notes create an ascending melodic line, G, A, B flat. This rising melodic figure creates a sense of rising tension and anticipation. In measure 8, A natural is a leading tone that occurs on the word "find". It is harmonized with an F

dominant seventh chord. A natural wants to resolve to a B flat. This resolution occurs in measure 12 with note B flat on the word “mind”. It is as if the word "find" is seeking a resolution and it "finds it" in the word “mind”.

In measures 5-8, Gershwin uses polyrhythm. The five syllable phrase in measure 5, "There's a saying old", is set to a recurring dotted rhythmic motif that is in 3/4 time, while the time signature indicates 4/4 and the bass note accompaniment is in duplet time. This energetic and optimistic rhythmic figure occurs when Kay speaks in clichés (measures 5-8), or when she is illuminating plot points (measures 13-16). It also recurs at the beginning of the chorus to convey a bouncy sense of optimism when Kay sings, "There's a somebody I'm longing to see".

Gershwin creates a sense of optimism by ending the phrase in measures 11-12 with a free neighboring tone. The melody settles on tonic note E flat, but suddenly it leaps up to the sixth scale degree on beat four and settles on the fifth scale degree on beat one of the next measure. This creates an optimistic feeling as Kay sings the text "A certain lad I've had in mind".

A similar melodic figure occurs on the words that correspond to rhyme scheme d. The words "yet," "forget," and "regret" occur on notes G, A, and E flat in measures 14, 16, and 19 respectively. The rising G to A melody creates a growing sense of tension, but the A natural leading that occurs on the word "forget" does not resolve to a B flat as it did in measure 12. It is left unresolved and the corresponding rhyming word, "regret," occurs on note E flat in measure 19. This creates a "dissonant" tri-tone tone interval between the rhyming words "forget" and "regret" which heightens the harmonic tension in the melody on the word “regret.” It is as though some of Kay's confidence and

determination has melted away with the unresolved harmonic tension on the word “regret.”

In section A of the verse, there is an interesting use of anticipation tones in measures 10-11 on the internal rhyme between words "lad" and "had." The word “lad” occurs on note G on beat three of measure 10. Gershwin uses a B flat dominant chord to harmonize this portion of the melody; therefore, note G is not a part of the chord. It is actually an anticipation tone. It anticipates the E flat chord on beat one of measure 11. The word “had” occurs on beat one of measure 11, so the word “lad” anticipates the word “had.” This creates continuity between these two words and ties them together melodically as well as by rhyme. There is a mistake in the chords for the guitar part. The guitar chord above this anticipation tone should be B flat with an added sixth, not a G minor chord.

In rhyme scheme e of the verse, there is a common tone and a common chord that ties rhyming words “monogram” and “lamb.” In measure 23, the word "monogram" occurs on note B flat with a G minor chord in the accompaniment. In measure 28, the word "lamb" does. This connects these two rhyming words together and creates continuity.

Gershwin really demonstrates his skills in the transition section of this piece. In this transition section, measure 21-28, there is tonicization of the key of F and a modulation to the key of B flat. For example, at the end of measure 20 there is a D dominant seventh chord that acts as a pivot chord to the tonal area of F major. D dominant seventh resolves to the chord G minor on beat one of measure 21. The G minor chord is a minor two chord in the key F major. There is a C major chord, which acts like

a dominant chord, in the next measure and another G minor in the next measure. In measure 24, there is a C dominant seventh chord, but it does not resolve to an F tonic chord; therefore, there is no confirmation of the key of F major. Then there is an abrupt common tone modulation from the C dominant seventh chord in measure 24 to a B flat major chord at the beginning of measure 25. Then there is a predominant, dominant to tonic confirmation of the key of B flat in measures 26- 27, but Gershwin immediately converts this B flat tonic chord into a B flat dominant seventh by adding a seventh at the end of measure 28. All of these tonicizations and modulations destabilize the home key and create tonal ambiguity, which harmonically adds emphasis to the words "Tell me, where is the shepherd for this lost lamb?" Tell this lost lamb, where is the key now, Gershwin?

Gershwin tonicizes and modulates to the keys of F major and B flat major in the transition. This colors the mood of the text. For example, the G minor two chords from the key of F major in measures 21 and 23 color this text and give it a dark or sad tone. Kay is brooding that she would "like to add his initial to my monogram." Gershwin harmonizes these words with primarily G minor chords to give them a sad tone.

The next phrase is in the key of B flat major. The rest of the piece is in the key of E flat major. Consequently, the phrase in measures 25- 28 is a fifth higher than the rest of the piece. Gershwin puts this entire phrase a fifth higher to heighten the intensity of the words "Tell me, where is the shepherd for this lost lamb?"

Gershwin also brings out the pleading tone of the words "Tell me" in measure 25 by placing them on the highest notes in the piece thus far. They are also half notes; therefore, Gershwin uses rhythmic elongation to further emphasize these two important

words.

High notes and rhythmic elongation are used throughout “Someone To Watch Over Me.” Wherever there are important words, Gershwin puts them on high notes and wherever Kay is referring to herself the note values are elongated. For example, in measure 21, the words "I'd like" are on longer note values than the other notes in this phrase. In measures 27-28, "this lost lamb" is on half note and whole note values. And the word "me" occurs on the longest note value of the piece in measures 34-35.

In the chorus, the rhyme scheme is aaaabbbaccadda. In the A section, Gershwin puts the rhyming words on notes in the melody that are related to each other by step. For example, in measures 30-36, the words from rhyme scheme a are "see," "he," "be," and "me." These words occur on notes D, C, B flat, and the word “me” is a melisma that encompasses notes G and F. This D, C, B flat, G, F descending melodic figure gives the text a sense that Kay's attitude is turning from confident to doubtful.

In the A section of the chorus, Gershwin places the word "longing" on the highest note of the phrase. "Longing" occurs on a high F note, just like the words "Tell Me" in the transition. This high note gives the words an emphatic sound. Additionally, note F is outside of the A flat chord in the accompaniment. This gives note F added harmonic tension and adds to the emotional impact of the word "longing."

In measures 33 -34, Gershwin leaps up a fifth from note A flat to E flat on the words "who'll watch." This leap up to "watch" is dramatic because he immediately jumps down an octave to E flat on the word "over." These leaps give the word "watch" a pleading sound. There is an opportunity to employ text painting on the word "over" by leaping up a note from the word "watch," but Gershwin leaps down instead. This

indicates that the word "watch" is more important than "over." Kay really needs someone to "watch" over her.

The connection between the word "me" in measures 35-36 and measure 43 is significant. The first "me" in measures 35-36 ends with notes G and F. The F supertonic in measure 36 wants to resolve to note E flat and it does on "me," but not until measure 43. This connects these to arrival points melodically and grammatically.

The different cadences in measures 35-36 and measure 43 highlight Kay's emotional state at the end of each phrase. The A section words are "I hope that he turns out to be someone who'll watch over me," but she is not sure this will happen because the phrase is left unresolved when it ends on note F, the supertonic. In contrast, the words in A1 are "I know I could always be good to one who'll watch over me." This phrase ends with a confident resolution to the tonic on the word "me." Kay "knows" she would always be good.

The bridge is another example of Gershwin's use of harmony and melody to bring out the meaning and emotion of the words in the text. The words "Although he may not be the kind of man some girls think of as handsome" occur on melodic notes that are primarily static. Also, the underlying harmony is virtually static in this phrase. The accompaniment is a tonic, subdominant, tonic chord progression. This progression is essentially a prolongation of the tonic. The static nature of the melody and harmony indicate that Kay really does not care what other girls think about her man, but when she sings, "To my heart he carries the key," there is a quick circle of fifths progression that destabilizes the tonic and creates tonal ambiguity. This highlights how intense her feelings are regarding Jimmy. He really does carry the key to Kay's heart. And she gets

verklemppt, every time she thinks about it.

The rhyming words "key" and "me" are connected to each other melodically in measure 51-52 and measures 59-60. This is similar to what occurred with the word "me" between the A section and A1. The word "key" ends on an unresolved supertonic and is finally resolved in measure 59 on the word "me." This connects these words melodically and grammatically. It underscores the fact that Jimmy does hold the key to Kay's heart. Are there some sexual overtones here?

The return of the A section in measures 53-60 is accompanied by a similar emphasis on important words in the melody. Again, high note F puts emphasis on the important words "put on some speed." The high F notes make it sound as though Kay is pleading with the listener to "tell him to put on some speed, follow my lead, oh, how I need someone to watch over me".

The rhyming words "speed," "lead," and "need" from rhyme scheme d occur on notes D, C and B flat. They create a descending melodic pattern that connects these particular rhyming words together. This time there is no sense of doubt in the descending melodic line as there was in the first statement of the A section because the text conveys a sense of confidence when she says "tell him to put on some speed, follow my lead." This time, the descending melodic line creates a feeling that Kay is resolved. She will get Jimmy. That sense of resolve is heightened when the melody resolves itself strongly on the E flat tonic on the word "me".

With these elements of Gershwin's rhyme scheme, melody, harmonization and overall structure in mind, it is possible to deliver a better-informed performance of "Someone To Watch Over Me." It is also possible to make an evaluation of the

recordings on our CD.

The Keri Te Kanawa performance is excellent because she brings out the polyrhythm in measures 5-8. She also emphasizes the high notes in the melody that correspond to important words. For example, she emphasizes the words "tell me" in measure 25. She brings out the high F's in measures 30 and 54 on the words "longing" and "put on." She uses rubato sparingly to allow the bouncy rhythm to shine, but the orchestral introduction is weak. They don't play Gershwin's introduction. In general, this recording is too smooth and is more classical in nature and it does not really capture the Jazz influence in Gershwin's piano accompaniment.

Joan Morris's performance is too slow and consequently it loses the bouncy rhythm of Gershwin's polyrhythm. All of the rhythmic interest is gone. This recording ranks at the bottom of the eight tracks on this CD.

Marni Nixon's performance isn't bad. She keeps the rhythm mostly intact. The piano accompaniment is well done because the pianist simply hits single chords during the verse to allow Marni to float the rubato in the verse unencumbered. She really brings out the arc of the opening phrase of the chorus because she doesn't take a breath. It adds a heightened sense of tension to this phrase. Her tempo is too slow.

Jeri Southern's performance best captures the context and mood of this piece. She has the essence of the 1920's in her voice. The husky/airy quality of her voice feels like a smoke filled speak-easy. This recording takes a lot of liberties with the introduction, and accompaniment. During the repetition of the chorus, she improvises a melody with "oohs" instead of the words. There is a beautiful moment at the end with a fermata on the word "need." At the very end, they repeat of the last phrase "Someone To

"Watch Over Me" and add some very nice octave displacement to the melody. In my opinion, this performance is in the very best Jazz tradition and Gershwin would approve, even though they do not stick to the script, the essentials are there.

Elton's performance is pop-influenced, but he does bring out the important words. He lets the rhythm bounce. He uses too much rubato in the bridge. It's not bad, but not great.

Blossom Dearier uses octave displacement on the important words "tell me" in the transition and consequently the intensity of those words is lost. Her tempo is too slow and sleepy in the chorus. She doesn't bring out the intensity of the words "put on some speed" in measure 54. The piano solo would be nice if it picked up the tempo, but it doesn't really go anywhere except where we've already been. This recording is boring.

Arthur Prysock's recording features some very nice instrumentation and added accompanimental figures from the piano. The orchestra, piano, drum and vibraphone combination gives this recording a big sound that matches Arthur's voice. They start with the chorus, which kind of gives away the goods too soon. There is no verse to set up the scenario for us in advance of the chorus, but he accents the important words nicely.

Lena Horne's recording is nice because it takes the chorus at a faster tempo and she allows the rhythm in Gershwin's composition to shine. She uses a lot of rubato in the beginning of the verse, which obscures the polyrhythm, but she picks up the tempo a bit in the chorus and the chorus acts as a nice balance to the rubato in the verse. The piano riffs fit nicely into the cracks between phrases and the brisk pace of the piano contrasts well with the slower vocal line. She really brings out the anguish in the words "tell me" in the transition. The saxophone accompaniment is tasteful too.

In my opinion, Arthur Prysock's recording is third best on this CD. Lena Horne's recording is second best and Jeri Southern's recording is the best rendition of "Someone To Watch Over Me" on this CD. It is hard to resist the "chill-bump" inducing moments at the end of Jeri's recording.

In conclusion, it is helpful to study the rhyme scheme, melodic shape, harmonization, rhythm and context, so that you can hit all of the important highlights and touch base with the composer's original intent. This gives the performer the ability to bring out the important words in the rhyme scheme and tastefully handle the rhythm. Then, you need to be willing to color outside of the lines and break a rule or two to deliver a truly great rendition of Gershwin's "Someone To Watch Over Me."

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