

# GLSG Newsletter

for the Gay & Lesbian Study Group  
of the American Musicological Society  
Volume Thirteen, Number One • Spring 2003  
ISSN #1087-8564

## Introduction

Welcome to the Spring 2003 issue of the *Newsletter* of the Gay & Lesbian Study Group of the American Musicological Society (AMS). The GLSG is a recognized special interest group of the AMS. A list of GLSG officers and their e-mail addresses appears at the end of this issue.

Our objectives include promoting communication among lesbian and gay music scholars, increasing awareness of issues in sexuality and music in the academic community, and establishing a forum for the presentation of lesbian and gay music studies. We also intend to provide an environment in which to examine the process of coming out in academia, and to contribute to a positive political climate for gay and lesbian affirmative action and curricula.

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## Remembering Philip Brett

*The following remembrance was given at the annual GLSG Business Meeting on 1 November 2002 in Columbus, Ohio.*

I have been asked to remember my friend and colleague Philip Brett, who died of cancer in Los Angeles on 16 October, the day before his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday.

*Si monumentum quæris, circumspice:* "If you seek his monument, look around you." Inscribed on the tomb of Sir Christopher Wren in St. Paul's Cathedral, this epitaph is equally appropriate for Philip Brett, the great architect of gay and lesbian studies in musicology. Look around you: everyone in this room – and, whether they acknowledge it or not, every member of the American Musicological Society as well – owes Philip a profound debt of gratitude. He has transformed our discipline, making it more relevant and humane; he has enlivened our work; and his liberating influence has transformed many of our lives as well. We would literally not be here today without him, for he was one of the brave and foresighted founders of the GLSG, and was its first male co-chair. Philip was a consummate scholar, an inspired performer as well as a beloved teacher. While he was a dedicated student of Tudor music, Philip's ongoing fascination with the life and work of Benjamin Britten also gave him the opportunity to make his pioneering exploration of the intersections between musicality and homosexuality.

Philip was born in Nottinghamshire, on 17 October 1937; his mother was a schoolteacher and his father was a collier. His musical abilities were evinced early in childhood, and led him to King's College, Cambridge. A potent influence at Cambridge was Philip's friendship with E.M. Forster, whose ethical discrimination and humane values provided him with a moral compass from which he never subsequently deviated. As a graduate student, Philip spent a year at Berkeley, where he was further influenced by the refined critical passion of Joseph Kerman. He returned to Berkeley as a member of the faculty in 1966 after completing his Ph.D.

The remainder of Philip's professorial career is a record of high achievement spent within the University of California. After 24 years at Berkeley, he moved to UC Riverside to join his partner, George Haggerty, a distinguished professor of English

literature. During his decade at Riverside, Philip served as chair and as associate dean, transforming the music department and influencing the university as a whole. In 2001, he joined the Department of Musicology at UCLA, attracted by a distinguished faculty that contains many of his friends and several former pupils.

Philip's initial area of research dealt with Tudor music: much of his recent work in this field was concentrated on the preparation of a splendid new edition of the music of William Byrd. Philip worked tirelessly on this edition until just a few weeks before his death; it is virtually finished. His expertise as a performer and conductor of early music was formidable: he was given the Noah Greenberg Award by the AMS in 1980 and was later nominated for a Grammy Award.

After coming out in 1973, Philip pondered how best to articulate the ways in which homosexuality is intertwined with expressions of musicality by lesbian and gay artists. His lifelong love of the music of Benjamin Britten provided him with his "key of promise." In 1976, Brett was the first to utter the word "gay" within the context of a musicological venue when he read a paper on *Peter Grimes* at a national meeting of the AMS. This paper, which was later published by *The Musical Times*, posited the then dangerously radical idea that study of Britten's sexual identity provided an enlightening context for the interpretation of his music.

Although the reactions of most of his peers were initially disheartening, Philip's determination never failed him. From 1976 onward, Philip produced a steady series of influential articles and books exploring the implications of gay and lesbian sexuality in music. In appreciation of his extraordinary achievement as scholar, teacher and organizer, the GLSG created the Philip Brett Award in 1996.

Some have remarked at the seeming dichotomy between Philip's engagement with Tudor music and his work in gay and lesbian musicology. Anyone hearing the fervor with which he read papers on the sufferings of Catholic recusants, such as Byrd, during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras might have easily made a connection between these seemingly disparate areas. Philip, who was a gentle, courteous man of enormous charm, detested the oppression of the weak by the unjust strong, whether the strong of society were discriminating against Roman Catholics in the 16<sup>th</sup> century or against homosexuals in the 20<sup>th</sup>

and 21<sup>st</sup>. With unflagging courage, he fought against such oppression in his own inimitable way, through his research, his teaching, and the essential decency of his own example.

Today, on All Saints' Day, we remember Philip Brett, who is now one of our own saints. He passed from us in the darkest watches of the night, and so, to conclude this remembrance with music – as he would have wished – let us listen to the final movement from a work that he loved deeply: Britten's *Serenade* for tenor, horn and strings. The text is a sonnet by John Keats:

O soft emblamer of the still midnight,  
Shutting with careful fingers and benign  
Our gloom-pleased eyes,  
embowered from the light,  
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:  
O soothest Sleep! if so it please thee, close  
In midst of this thine hymn my willing eyes,  
Or wait the "Amen" ere thy poppy throws  
Around my bed its lulling charities.  
Then save me, or the passed day will shine  
Upon my pillow, breeding many woes.  
Save from curious Conscience, that still lords  
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like a mole:  
Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,  
And seal the hushed Casket of my Soul.

--Byron Adams, University of California, Riverside

### Review

Ellen T. Harris. *Handel As Orpheus: Voice and Desire in the Chamber Cantatas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001. xi, 420 pp.

Attention to Handel's sexuality has a short contemporary history. In 1981 George Rousseau, an eighteenth-century cultural scholar, broached the topic by way of listing him among a group of life-long bachelors including Walpole, Pope, Swift, and Gray.<sup>1</sup> Scholars in this realm have concentrated their studies on Walpole, Pope, and Gray, however. In his article,

<sup>1</sup> George Rousseau, "Threshold and Explanation: The Social Anthropologist and the Critic of Eighteenth-Century Literature," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 22 (Spring 1981): 127-152.

"Was G.F. Handel Gay?," Gary Thomas examines the Handel "question" on a "larger ideological grid."<sup>2</sup> Employing cultural history, textual deconstruction, and queer theory, Thomas's method contextualizes the composer and "deconstructs the romanticized image of Handel as well as "constructs" an open ended multi-textual alternative."<sup>3</sup> Cultural scholars such as Thomas and Rousseau have championed much of the cause for a gay Handel, while most Handel scholars have either defended the speculative affair with Vittoria Tarquini,<sup>4</sup> or have brushed the sexuality problem aside as non-important.

Ellen Harris, a veteran Handel scholar who has provided much knowledge about Handel's Italian period (1706-1710) and his musical output there, provides a historical, cultural, musical, and textual argument for Handel's homosexuality in her latest monograph *Handel As Orpheus: Voice and Desire in the Chamber Cantatas*, which is the culmination of thirty years of research, and for which she recently received the American Musicological Society's 2002 Otto Kinkeldey Award. A book of this kind was not the author's original intent, which was to write a text "providing source information, chronology, and descriptive analysis..." (p.1). Harris remarks that "three milestones" led to the book's genesis. First, Handel composed the cantatas during a specific period, 1706-1723, which corresponds with the time in which he composed music for the homes of aristocratic patrons. Second, same-sex relationships were fostered and accepted within those social circles, and finally, a close textual reading utilizing their literary traditions corroborated a homoerotic subtext (p. 1). Her result, however, is a book that contextualizes Handel's cantatas in terms of their social, historical, and literary backgrounds.

Much like Gary Thomas, Harris delves into the social and cultural sources in Handel's biography

<sup>2</sup> Gary Thomas, "Was G.F. Handel Gay?," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (NY and London: Routledge Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 156.

<sup>4</sup> While in Italy, Handel is said to have had an affair with the singer Vittoria Tarquini ("La Bombace"). Though scholars like Harris refute this relationship, it represents one aspect of the Handel "question". Another shade to the argument reflects the need for a pure and celibate Handel as some kind of sacred being.

in an effort to provide further context for her interpretation. Unlike Thomas, who focuses on Handel's English period,<sup>5</sup> Harris attempts to unravel the queer question as reflected in the time period in which he wrote the cantatas, 1706-1723; however, much of her discussion specifically addresses Handel's stay in Italy from 1706-1710. Generally speaking, Harris supplements Thomas's argument by providing musical-textual evidence and concentrates on periods in which Handel associated with patrons who were supporters or known supporters of same-sex acts. The time corresponds to the years Handel spent in Italy, Germany and the early years in England.

*Handel As Orpheus* refers to the cantata *Hendel non può mia musa* (1706), with text by Cardinal Benedetto Pamphili (1653-1730), in which Pamphili compares Handel to Orpheus. She theorizes that the work reflects Pamphili's homoerotic attraction and praise of Handel. The conclusions drawn about the Orpheus cantata form the basis for her analysis for the rest of the chamber cantatas. Three themes reoccur throughout the book and indeed form the barometer for her investigation: literary codes, the identification and interpretation of a homosexual subtext, and personal behavior of an author or composer regarding his work (this includes the alteration of texts in an attempt at secrecy) (p. 37).

The book has six chapters, a prologue and epilogue, and two appendices (one, a chronology of Handel's cantatas; and two, full translations of sixty-seven cantata texts).<sup>6</sup> The prologue addresses the scholarly debate on Handel and homosexuality. It also examines the eighteenth-century concept of the term "homosexual" as it existed in London,<sup>7</sup> as well

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5 Gary Thomas devotes several pages of discussion to the Italian period and Handel's time with Pamphili and Ottoboni, who attracted young artists such as Corelli, Steffani, and later Handel to their estates. Thomas's thorough study, partly chronological, of Handel's sexuality is unfortunately limited to a book chapter.

6 Harris translates only those cantatas that are confidently attributed to Handel.

7 "Homosexuality" is a modern term with modern associations and consequences. "Sodomy" would have been the preferred term during Handel's time, but Harris decides to use "homosexual" declaring "rather than seeking a new word "sodomy," I have chosen to use homosexuality

as London's "gay" sub-culture and public attitudes towards it.<sup>8</sup> In chapter 1, "Code Names and Assumed Identities," the author studies Handel's *Hendel non può mia musa*.<sup>9</sup> A close reading of Pamphili's text in terms of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* "illustrates that the image of Orpheus provided a double emblem of musician and homosexual, not just in the classical era but in the eighteenth century as well" (p.2). Indeed, Ovid refers to Orpheus as "the originator of male homosexuality" (p.32). Chapters 2, 3, and 4 discuss the cantatas composed in Italy between 1706-1710, which Harris delineates by genre (solo cantatas, continuo cantatas, and cantatas for multiple characters).

Chapter 2, "Women's voices/Men's voices," looks at the ways in which Handel differentiated gender in the solo cantatas. According to Harris, women speak through their own voices while men articulate through a narrative structure (p.50). A dichotomy of structure and style results: cantatas for solo female characters, such as Agrippina or Armida, use strong voices that reflect elements of the seventeenth-century Italian cantata, characterized by free structural forms, and representing hysterical states of mind.<sup>10</sup> Male voices on the other hand conform to the r-a-r-a structure, a typical configuration for both *opera seria* and Italian cantatas from this period. Instead of characters and stories that derive from ancient history and mythology, pastoral themes and characters dominate. Harris concludes, "in the evolution of his [Handel's] cantata style more generally, Handel largely gave up the voice of women for the more controlled (masculine) voice of reason" (p.66).

Chapter 3, "Pastoral Lovers," discusses the continuo cantatas from the aspect of their literary heritage. Employing Theocritus's *Idylls* and Virgil's

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as a term that includes all states of same-sex desire and activity with the hope that the reader will be able to disassociate it from its modern meaning of an individual identity" (p.16).

8 For more, see Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700-1830* (London: GMP, 1992).

9 On Handel's relationship with Pamphili, see Hans Marx, "Händel in Rom: Seine Beziehung zu Benedetto Pamphili," in *HJb* 29 (1983): 107-18.

10 Hysteria was a common seventeenth and eighteenth-century stereotype of women (p.63)



*Eclogues*, Harris argues that a close textual reading of the continuo cantatas allows for a homosexual reading of those texts. Most of Handel's continuo cantatas feature nameless voices. Often when a role is named, that role is the object of desire and not the singer. One should also take in mind that members of the Roman Arcadians often took pastoral names, and if one considers for whom and for which occasion these works were composed (male patrons and an all-male Arcadian society), a homoerotic reading remains one possibility. As Harris asserts, "in the Arcadian Academy of Rome, to which all of Handel's Roman patrons belonged and for which he composed, members adopted elaborate pastoral names—Cardinal Ottoboni, for example, was known as Crateo Ericino Pastore, and Cardinal Pamphili as Fenicio Larisseo" (p.9). One name that does appear in the cantata texts is Olinto [Arsenio], who is mentioned in the cantata *Oh, come chiare* (1708). Olinto was a pastoral name for Ruspoli, Handel's patron at the time (p. 9). Such titles as Tirsi and Aminta, who appear in several cantatas by Handel "cannot typically be connected to specific individuals; however, these common names could serve as better disguises for personal expression than the thinly veiled Arcadian names" (p.10). Many of the continuo cantatas are written in soprano clef. Since castratos and sopranos sang these roles interchangeably, the meaning behind the text would change with the gender of the performer. But as Harris says, "eighteenth-century performing practice encouraged gender play" (p.113). Harris later admits, "such specific textual evidence is still lacking, but gender flexibility can be read in their deliberate ambiguity..." (p.113).

Chapter 4, "Cantata Couples and Love Triangles" examines the duets and trio cantatas. Harris writes that multiple voiced works, which she divides into cantatas with pastoral, political, and mythological themes reflect the "depiction of the sublimation of sensual pleasure" (p. 169). One aspect of the "sublimation of pleasure," "Silence and Secrecy," is the subject of Chapter 5. By 1710 Handel increased the use of musical "silence" (or extended rests) in the cantatas for Hannover and London. In her discussion, Harris argues that "the increased use of breaks and silences coincides with the same increase and use in literature and drama," which was a "period of heightened political and social tensions that emphasized "silence and secrecy" (p. 175). Lord Burlington, one of Handel's earliest patrons and a possible homosexual, and his English transplanted

Arcadian society feature prominently in Harris discussion. During the 1710s and 1720s Burlington hosted a circle of artists including Alexander Pope (1688-1744) and John Gay (1685-1732), who both wrote text Handel later set and who, like Lord Burlington, may have been homosexuals (p.188).

Chapter 6 continues Harris's chronological discussion of the cantatas. This section investigates possible allegorical meanings in Handel's *Acis and Galatea* and *Esther*. Continuing the Orpheus theme, the author believes that one possible reading for Acis's death might reflect eighteenth-century legal attitudes towards homosexuality: "Acis's death also resonates (as did Orpheus's) with the horrific Georgian stonings of homosexuals in the pillory. Similarly, Polyphemus would represent the "monstrous law condemning men of same-sex acts to death" (p. 233-234).

The Epilogue describes England in the 1730s and the increase of anti-homosexual feelings. English society during this period underwent a paradigm shift from a group that tolerated same-sex acts to the exact opposite (p. 241). The four years between 1724 and 1730 resulted in four hangings, eight fines and sentences, and three acquittals.<sup>11</sup> Anti-homosexual activism climaxed in 1726 with the raid on the Mother Clap's Molly House in London, resulting in forty arrests. Arnold Harvey comments on the period between 1726-1730, saying: the hardening of sexual stereotypes could also have affected homosexuals by making non-homosexuals more disposed to spy on, investigate, report, and prosecute homosexual activity. It may have been that in earlier periods homosexuality was less noticed because non-homosexuals were less ready to draw conclusions about their neighbours that would later seem obvious and irresistible. Thus the increase of prosecutions of homosexuals may be seen as an index of a shift in a whole complex of attitudes in society as a whole."<sup>12</sup>

In artistic circles that included homosexuals, the increase of "coded artistic depictions and veiled allusions" became ever-important (p. 241). Harris ties Handel and Pope with this period of "veiled allusions". During the 1730s Handel erased or changed many of the same-sex allusions from the

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11 Arnold D. Harvey, *Sex in Georgian England: Attitudes and Prejudices from the 1720s to the 1820s* (NY:St. Martin's Press, 1994).

12 *Ibid*, 153.

chamber cantatas written in Italy. Likewise, Alexander Pope altered the homoerotic lines in "Autumn."

Harris's book presents an exceptional and convincing argument for a homosexual Handel, while providing valuable insights into the social and cultural aspects of the cantatas. Beyond the biographical contribution to Handelian scholarship, *Handel As Orpheus*, should become a valuable resource for musicology and eighteenth-century music studies. Since much information is lacking for a definitively gay Handel, one can only theorize a possible sexual construction for him. As Thomas warned, Ellen Harris similarly asserts that she cannot say with certainty that Handel was gay, nor can one argue, based on documentary evidence, that he likewise wrote gay music.

Recently, Ellen Harris won the American Musicology Society's 2002 Otto Kinkeldey Award for the most distinguished book published within the last year. This is the first time that a queer topic has received the award. One can only hope that the scholarly themes, which in the past have been dubbed queer, "New," and post-modern musicology, are finally receiving serious attention from the scholarly community that would have received negative review twenty years previously. Queer musical studies may finally make its final step from the (musical) closet.

--Robert Torre, Universität Tübingen

**Signifying Nothing: "It's a Sin,"  
The Pet Shop Boys, and Camp**

*The following is excerpted from the author's master's thesis in musicology "People Are Still Having Sex: AIDS, Gay Men and the Uses of 1980s Dance Music," University of Pittsburgh, 2003.*

The opening lyrics to The Pet Shop Boys' "It's a Sin" (1987) read like a litany of self-loathing:

When I look back upon my life  
It's always with a sense of shame  
I've always been the one to blame.  
For everything I want to do,  
No matter what or when or who  
Has one thing in common too:  
It's a sin.

While virtually all queer people feel these sentiments

at one time or another, why would a group made up of gay men with a large gay male following present such embarrassingly blatant internalized homophobia in a dance song meant to be used (at least to some extent) in gay clubs?<sup>1</sup> With hostility to homosexuality proliferating throughout American society, why would gay men wish to reiterate homophobic sentiment publicly and risk reinforcing its discursive power?

One explanation lies in the discourse of camp, the cultural strategy by which pre-Stonewall gay men created a sensibility that gave them a common and recognizable bond in an era when secrecy and discretion were vital. Although notoriously difficult to define precisely, a certain ironic relation to and distance from the subject are hallmarks of the camp viewer's gaze.<sup>2</sup> Rather than valuing content,

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship of the Pet Shop Boys to the queer community has been somewhat complicated. Although their primary audience has always been gay men and their homosexuality has been an open secret for years, they officially "came out" only in 1994, and journalist John Gill drew the group's ire for mentioning the gay subtexts of their first album in a review (John Gill, *Queer Noises* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995], 1-9).

<sup>2</sup> Sorting through all of the conflicting definitions of "camp" and to whom (if anyone) it belongs is an arduous task. Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on Camp" (in *Against Interpretation* [New York: Octagon Books, 1978], 275-92) struggles to draw a broad outline of camp sensibility and values. Although it remains one of the clearest elucidations of what camp looks like (Sontag treats camp as primarily a visual and stylistic aesthetic), many authors have since pointed to the shortcomings in Sontag's portrait. Moe Meyer, for one, takes issue with her assertion that camp can be separated from homosexuality (Moe Meyer, "Introduction," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* [London: Routledge, 1994], 7-11). In *No Respect* (New York: Routledge, 1989), Andrew Ross points out that Sontag's characterization of camp as "depoliticized--or at least apolitical" (Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 277) ignores both the roots of camp in post-Wilde pre-Stonewall gay culture and the implications of camp's devaluing of traditional ideas of cultural capital and aesthetic judgment (Ross, 144-148). Richard Dyer's "It's Being So Camp That Keeps Us Going," in *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002), provides a description of camp and its uses that is akin to my own.

emotional impact, or aesthetic "worth" in an object or work, camp delights in artifice, in the (usually unwitting) discord between the intended meaning of a work and the ironic interpretation by a willfully subversive viewer/listener. This, combined with camp's disregard for the established ideas of "good" and "bad," sometimes crosses the line into an enjoyment (albeit an ironic one) of kitsch or "bad taste" for its own sake.

The camp sensibility also values exaggeration as a way to highlight style and defuse content. Many camp cinematic idols, for instance, are revered precisely for their larger-than-life personae and trademark overacting.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on extravagant performance and ornamentation can also be used to subvert the intended or generally received meanings of a work. For example, a camp reading transforms the dire tone and overwrought paranoia of 1933's *Reefer Madness* (a favorite of the camp-influenced cult film circuit) from an urgent if spurious warning about the dangers of marijuana smoking into a comic celebration of the same habit.

The highly ironic, artificial world of camp, where things are never really what they claim to be, was a singularly desirable place to be for pre-Stonewall gay men. At the Cold War's height in the 1950s and 1960s, the McCarthyist Right characterized homosexuals (both male and female) as a threat to democratic society. Besides being easily subject to blackmail (and thus inherently untrustworthy), the mere fact of an individual's same-sex desire indicated all sorts of inherent weaknesses and moral turpitude. According to official (medical, governmental, and religious) discourse, homosexuality was also infectious—one gay person, no matter how discreet, could corrupt an entire population, sending the entire nation sliding headlong toward effeminacy and ruin.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hence the camp value of Liza Minnelli, Mae West, Joan Crawford, and other actresses whose overwrought dramatic interpretations of femininity and histrionics would not win praise from an acting coach.

<sup>4</sup> In *Making History*, Marcus contains references to characterizations of homosexuals as mentally ill on pages 16-25. *The Sixth Man* (New York: McFadden, 1961), Jess Stearn's pulpy "journalistic" investigation into homosexual male life in the late 1950s, has several examples of the perception of gay men as "un-American" or disloyal, most notably on pages 135-137.

Gay men, depicted by many outlets of mainstream society as a threat to the entire nation's well-being, simply could not accept the dominant portrayals of them if they were to continue living at all.<sup>5</sup> Since, as a community, they possessed too little social power to disseminate alternate images, many gay men instead "camped up" the supposed characteristics of hedonism, superficiality, and effeminacy among themselves, rendering the demonizations ridiculous by exaggeration.<sup>6</sup>

The modern movement for gay liberation dates from the 1969 Stonewall Riots, when patrons of a gay bar finally fought back against police harassment.<sup>7</sup> The unexpected outcome of the raid (several police officers severely injured by drag queens) made gays throughout the country aware of their possible numeric strength and political power. Influenced by the rising tide of feminism and the black civil rights movement, Gay Liberation succeeded during the 1970s in winning various measures of protection and acceptance for gays and lesbians.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Obviously, these were not the opinions of every heterosexual alive during the 1950s and 1960s. However, when I speak of "heterosexuals," "straight society," "mainstream society," and the like, I am talking about a hegemonic discourse rather than making essential generalizations about straight people.

<sup>6</sup> See the behavior of the characters in Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (New York: Samuel French, 1968).

Although the self-loathing expressed by all the characters renders the play quite dated, it is one of the only surviving pre-Stonewall depictions of gay males as such.

<sup>7</sup> The Stonewall Riot (a.k.a. Stonewall Rebellion) took place in New York City on June 28, 1969. Police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar patronized by drag queens. Vice-squad harassment and arrests were then common in places frequented by homosexual men, and at first the raid appeared to be routine. Soon, however, the Stonewall customers pelted police with coins, locked them inside the bar, and set the building on fire. In the ensuing *melée*, cars were set on fire, and several police officers were injured by flying debris. See Rey "Sylvia Lee" Rivera's first-hand account of the Stonewall Riot in Eric Marcus, *Gay American History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 190-192.

<sup>8</sup> The gay rights movement of the 1970s won several basic victories, including the removal of homosexuality as a

As the gay-rights movement gathered momentum, pre-Stonewall camp seemed increasingly out of place to many gay activists. At best it was anachronistic, a holdover from times when gay men were convinced that homosexuality necessarily equaled effeminacy and that homosexual difference could only be articulated by the knowing wink of an inside joke. At worst, the 1950s camp sensibility could actually hinder the gay cause. "Camp queens" reaffirmed heterosexual stereotypes of gay men as effete and vulnerable, while feminists criticized camp's appropriation of feminine clothing and images as dismissive of women's oppression.<sup>9</sup>

When the AIDS crisis and an accompanying resurgence in homophobic sentiment threatened the gains made by the post-Stonewall gay-rights movement, gay men resurrected the ironic strategies of camp (which had never truly died out) to cope with the new dangers. The 1980s were not an exact duplication of the 1950s, however. The civil-rights movement had created an awareness of minority experience in America, and feminist analysis had called traditional gender/sexual roles into question. Additionally, the successes of various protest movements (such as the anti-Vietnam War rallies) reminded gays (and others) of their collective power as agents for change in government. Gay men were now less apologetic than they once were, and much more likely to openly discuss the problems facing their community and demand solutions from mainstream society.

Cultural products made by and for gays enjoyed a wider distribution in the 1980s than in previous eras. Relaxation of obscenity laws in the 1970s meant that pictures and magazines could be circulated with less fear of legal trouble. In music, the

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category of illness from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in 1973. Moreover, various anti-gay movements such as Anita Bryant's Save Our Children found much less support than expected.

<sup>9</sup> See Eric Marcus's interview with Randy Shilts in *Making History*: "The new way of being gay was...being powerful and asserting your power...We weren't going to be sissies anymore. Being butch was the new way. It was a total recasting of what it meant to be gay in America." in Marcus, 234. For views of effeminate gay men (especially drag queens) as oppressors of women, see *ibid*, 266-268.

popularity of rock encouraged displays of sexual difference that would probably not have been tolerated in pre-1960s America.<sup>10</sup> Gay style flooded the mainstream music world throughout the 1980s, and with it came expressions of camp sensibility.

"It's a Sin" (1987) exemplifies the anxiety-tinged camp of the AIDS years. The Pet Shop Boys create a dance track that simultaneously expresses the shame and self-loathing experienced by most gay men at some point in their lives and renders that shame innocuous by investing the lyrics with a portent they are incapable of living up to. Through musical cues, we are led to expect a depth of meaning that the lyrics simply do not supply. The result is an invitation to puncture the text's pretensions to authority.

Exactly how does "It's A Sin" accomplish this discord between music and lyrics?<sup>11</sup> From its opening moments, the song builds an expectation of something profound (see timeline of important sections in Figure 1.1). A heavily distorted sample of a countdown begins the piece. The sample is from the NASA control room during an Apollo launch, but here the "lift-off" is strangely anticlimactic. Instead of an arrival point or even an energetic dance beat, all rhythmic motion ceases as the vocal sample fades and slows down into a four-part chorale at 0:08.

The four-part chorale performs several functions. Its open voicing expands the musical space of the piece (in contrast to the rather narrow range

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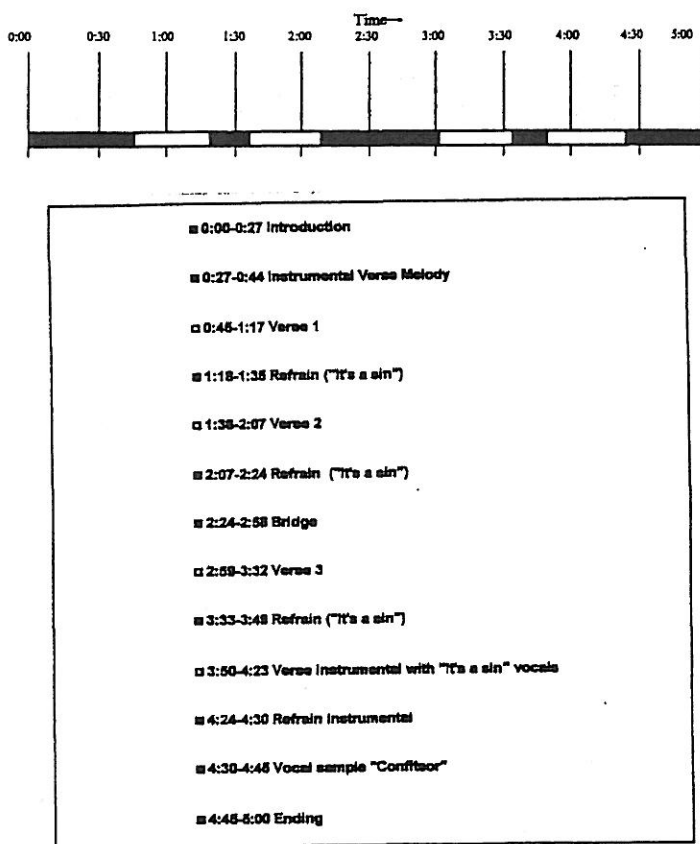
<sup>10</sup> Issues of gender and sexuality have always been grounds for conflict and contradiction in rock music. While often celebrating heterosexual masculinity, some (heterosexual) mainstream rock acts of the late 1960s and 1970s experimented with bending or transgressing traditional norms of gender presentation. Witness, for example, the popular androgynous personae of David Bowie, Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground, and the 1970s "glam rock" movement. John Gill discusses the implications of such heterosexual "queer" performances in *Queer Noises*, 106-113. Gender-oppositional performances by women were less common until the late 1970s and 1980s, when artists such as Grace Jones and Annie Lennox rose to prominence.

<sup>11</sup> In a dance-club environment, DJs often play only small parts of individual songs or combine songs to produce new sounds. Such fragmentation and recombination necessarily produce different effects than the ones I am discussing here. However, both "It's A Sin" and "Relax" circulated widely as singles, and it is these album versions that I analyze here.



that will follow). Round tone colors predominate in the synthesizer, with organ, string, and vocal timbres featured. The chorale is placed up in the higher registers of the synthesizer, creating a sense of floating otherworldliness. The four-part chorale style is, of course, associated explicitly with music of the church, especially when created by church-organ or vocal timbres. The chorale in open voicing tends to evoke the immense proportions of Gothic architecture,

Figure 1.1: "It's A Sin" Timeline



where mere human beings are dwarfed by huge columns, intricate stained-glass windows, and vaulted ceilings. This gigantic scale is both awesome and terrifying as the vast space highlights mortal insignificance. For gay men, invocation of church music is particularly meaningful given the Christianity's history of condemnation and persecution of queer people. A gay man is not only tiny but out of place in the house of God, and the sublime awe of entering sacred space is compounded by the almost paranoid fear of rejection by the church,

a feeling experienced by most homosexuals coming of age in traditional branches of Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

Faced with the possibility of damnation, a gay camp answer is to take control of the church by making it into theater. This happens at the cadence of the four-part chorale (0:23). A sudden, thunder-like blast from the synthesizer puts an end to the ethereality of the opening. Besides pulling the piece out of the spiritual realm and into more mortal planes, this crash marks an important moment of transformation in the song. The dance beat begins immediately after the crash, moving the song's locus of control from the celestial otherworld to the (gay) dance floor. Sudden moments of transformation are staples of gay camp—with a snap of the fingers, an ordinary situation becomes a production number, and the "fairy" takes control of situations that were formerly controlling him.<sup>13</sup> The church, where gays find uneasy acceptance at best, becomes a theatrical venue. At the arrival of the disco beat (0:26), we move from evocations of the actual church to the church as a kind of set-piece, securely within gay camp control.

After the beat begins, we hear an instrumental statement of the verse melody (Figure 1.2). The melody consists of four phrases structured into sequences (A-A'-B-C, A-A'-B'-C'), and the first thing that one notices about it is a remarkable lack of variation. The range of the melody is quite narrow (from B to F), and the rather austere orchestration of the chorale has been filled in by synthesized strings and keyboards. In contrast to the opening (0:00-0:27), the sudden collapse of the range and musical space produces a feeling of claustrophobia. At 0:39, a sample of a sermon at Westminster Abbey can be heard, though it is unintelligible and quickly

<sup>12</sup> Of course, there are gay Christian churches (such as the Metropolitan Community Church) as well as gay-friendly congregations and groups within primarily heterosexual denominations. However, most gay Christian groups must still deal with significant opposition from co-religionists and church hierarchies.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of this strategy include the movie *Jeffrey*, where the title character's anxiety about sex in the age of AIDS turns into a game show and the music video to George Michael's single "Outside," in which a men's room (like the one in which he was arrested) suddenly becomes a disco.

disappears.<sup>14</sup> In the gay church-as-set-piece, the minister's words are unimportant; his primary function is to evoke a religious atmosphere.

The lead vocal enters at 0:45 with the first and second stanzas of the lyrics (See Appendix A). Like the accompanying melody, the text has surprisingly little variance in content or structure. The short, repetitive phrases of the text match up with the short, repetitive phrases of the melody:

**Text by Musical Phrase**

A	When I look back upon my life
A'	It's always with a sense of shame
B	I've always been the one to blame
C	(Instrumental)
A	For everything I want to do
A'	No matter when or where or who
B'	Has one thing in common too
C'	It's a, it's a, it's a, it's a sin

A short transitional sequence ("Everything I've ever done/Everything I'll ever do/Every place I've ever been/Everywhere I'm going to") follows, creating a powerful trajectory towards the song's hook line, "It's a sin."

Figure 1.2: "It's A Sin" Verse Melody



The verse melody then repeats with the third stanza of lyrics followed by another repetition of the second

stanza. This repetition sets up yet another inexorable pull toward the phrase "It's a sin."

The bridge section begins at 2:24. The lush orchestration of the verse is stripped away, leaving only the vocals, drums, and chord changes in the bass. Although the spare texture of the bridge harks back to the opening chorale, it has nothing of the latter's spaciousness. In fact, the lower range, closer voicing, and chord progression of the bridge are closer to the scoring of horror movies than to church music. The bridge melody is also made up of four phrases even less varied than those of the verse, and the text scan is only slightly freer, A-B-A-B (A-B-A-C at the repeat). The texture becomes slightly thicker during the second hearing of the bridge with the addition of the thunderous synthesizer crash heard earlier. The end of the bridge leads into a modulation for the return of the verse, which culminates in an extended ending, which is essentially an instrumental rehearsing of the verse and refrain with all text removed except for "it's a sin." By this point in the song, the rest of the text no longer seems necessary. An abrupt end to the melody occurs at 4:30 before lead singer/vocalist Neil Tennant recites the Latin prayer *Confiteor* ("I confess the sins of my past..."). The music beyond this point offers an uneasy combination of ethereal chord changes and the disco beat before the song ends in another synthesized thunder crash.

The overall effect of "It's A Sin" is one of strange juxtaposition. Like most music meant for the dance club, the song is driving, repetitive, and energetic. However, the piece has an ominous edge not generally found in dance music. Minor tonality, distorted vocal samples, and synthesized organ and voice timbres make "It's A Sin" sound much darker and heavier than many dance-pop pieces.

If "It's A Sin" is full of weight and portent, to what is it referring? Although the vocal samples incorporated into the mix sound as if they should be saying something profound, most of them (with the exception of the final *Confiteor*) are actually rather banal. In the liner notes for the re-release of *Actually* (the album on which "It's A Sin" appears), lead vocalist Neil Tennant claims that most of the samples have "absolutely no relevance whatsoever,"<sup>15</sup> and indeed, the melody's restrictive range, the unyielding beat, and the liturgically-coded timbres and voicings

<sup>14</sup> Liner notes to *Actually* (Compact disc), Capitol 7243 5 30506 2 7 (1987).

<sup>15</sup> Liner notes to *Actually* (Compact disc), Capitol 7243 5 30506 2 7 (1987).

that show up throughout the song create an ominous sonic atmosphere that dwarfs the rather mundane content of the text.

Neil Tennant's vocal delivery further trivializes the lyrics of "It's a Sin." If dance music is a genre that normally prizes voices that convey immediacy and sexual energy, Tennant's voice stands out as remarkably cold and affectless. In contrast to the driving energy of the musical accompaniment, Tennant puts no motion in his melodic lines, rendering them square and stagnant. Even his English accent, stripped of any recognizable regional aspects, works to create a vocal line that is crisp, precise, and easily understandable, but also completely detached from any involvement in the content of the lyrics.

The cool detachment of the vocal line tends to clash with the weightiness promised by the music's dark orchestration and religious touches. While Tennant's dead and unimpassioned inflection adds layers of meaning to lyrics in other Pet Shop Boys songs (most notably in "Rent," also appearing on *Actually*), the words of "It's a Sin" suffer in the cold glare of this straight-on delivery. Without any forward motion to the vocals, the mechanical, greeting-card-like meter and scan become painfully obvious, and the distance grows between the musical world of high ceremony and the lyrical wash of mundane self-loathing.

In "Being Boring," Stan Hawkins discusses the vocal style of The Pet Shop Boys, relating it to new developments in masculinity during the Reagan-Thatcher years of uncertainty and economic depression.<sup>16</sup> Although Hawkins raises a number of points about the precarious state of masculine identity in the 1980s for all males, he does not seem to think that The Pet Shop Boys speak to gay men in any particular way. He points out that a significant part of the band's following was made up of "laddish" youths who, had they been fully aware of homosexual subtexts in the songs, would have heartily disapproved.<sup>17</sup> In addition, during the 1980s, no

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<sup>16</sup> Stan Hawkins, "Being Boring: Musicology, Masculinity, and Banality," In *Sexing the Groove*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 111-132.

<sup>17</sup> This is especially true of the group's fans in their native UK. In the United States, a more than passing familiarity with The Pet Shop Boys is to some extent coded as a gay male attribute. Kevin Dilallo and Jack Krumholtz's *The*

member of The Pet Shop Boys had yet officially "come out," and so the group was not openly or exclusively identified as a gay band.

Although it is good to remember that a wide spectrum of audiences listened to The Pet Shop Boys, and that the band was not necessarily releasing music with a conscious, exclusively gay message, it would be wrong to deny the presence of gay subtexts in their songs. Certainly John Gill, writing in 1986, picked up on queer meanings in Pet Shop Boys songs, and it cannot be pure chance that "It's a Sin" remains a gay dance club favorite, both in its original and extended-mix incarnations.<sup>18</sup> Whatever the original intentions or other uses of the song, the high-camp performance of self-loathing at once reminded gay men that their feelings of guilt and anxiety were shared by others and highlighted the absurdity of the endless *mea culpa* of internalized homophobia. Like the climactic scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, when the omnipotent Wizard turns out to be an unremarkable man behind the curtain, "It's A Sin" lifts the veil surrounding the anti-gay incantations of society and demystifies them, revealing them to be far less than the sum of their appearances.

In many ways, music is a uniquely suitable arena for this use of camp discourse as revelator. Unlike art forms such as literature or drama, music is often not explicitly tied to diagnosis and narrative. In fact, even when music purports to be "about" something, telling a story, or representing an object, the signifiers used to do so are usually more ambiguous and less describable than those used in other forms of expression.<sup>19</sup> As a result, intended

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*Unofficial Gay Manual* (New York: Main Street, 1994), a somewhat satirical guide to gay male stereotypes, list *Discography* (The Pet Shop Boys' retrospective album) in the "16 CDs every gay man should own," along with albums by Barbra Streisand, Bette Midler, and Judy Garland (108-110).

<sup>18</sup> Gill, *Queer Noises*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Writing about music often emphasizes the different and somehow ineffable nature of musical values and effects. Even "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music," Simon Frith's article attempting to outline a value system for popular music, contains lines such as, "But music is especially important to this process of placement [identity formation and expression] because of something *specific to musical experience*, namely, its direct emotional intensity [emphasis mine]," (139) and "Other cultural forms—

meanings in music are more open to subversion, and either listeners or producers can easily insert subtexts or counter-readings.

--Elisabeth Desirée ("Des") Harmon, University of Pittsburgh

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painting, literature, design—can articulate and show off shared values and pride, but only music can make you *feel* them [emphasis in original]," (140).

**SECRETARY-TREASURER'S REPORT 2002**

2002 total GLSG members: 72

**INCOME**

Carryover balance from 2001	+\$1,192.74
Additional income from 2002 memberships	+\$889.00
Income from sale of back issues	+\$22.50
Certificate of Deposit plus interest (as of 9/30/02)	+\$1,043.02

**EXPENDITURES**

Debts incurred including expense of annual incorporation in CO, misc. bank fees, GLSG Newsletter spring and fall expenses, modest honoraria for panel participants	-\$959.64
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TOTAL GLSG ASSETS AS OF 1 NOVEMBER 2002 (party debts not included)	+\$2,187.62
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**PHILIP BRETT AWARD:**

2002 contributions to the Philip Brett Award (forwarded on for investment by the AMS-Philadelphia, not included above)      +\$900.00

Total value of Philip Brett Award Endowment (as of Sept. 2002)      +\$7,381

**Deadline For The Next  
 GLSG Newsletter is September 9, 2003**  
 If you are interested in submitting an article, review, summary of appropriate conferences you've attended, please contact Jim Cassaro.