

**An Operatic Theatrical Honors Thesis Show:  
Operatic Influences in Musical Theatre**

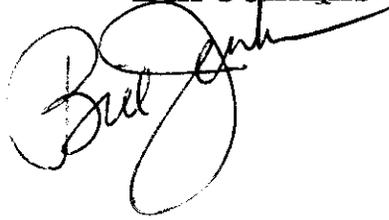
**an Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)**

**by**

**Rynice K. Hanson**

**Thesis Advisor:**

**Bill Jenkins**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bill Jenkins", written over the printed name. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

**Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana**

**December 2004**

**December 19, 2004**

## **Abstract**

This thesis, comprised of a performance and extensive program notes, explores the influence of opera and operetta in the formation and development of American musical theatre from the turn of the twentieth century to today. The program notes, included here, are representative of the research conducted to provide a background to the performance portion of the thesis. The notes are organized chronologically by composers and shows which represent the influence of the operatic musical style in musical theatre.

The performance parallels the subject matter in that it begins formally as a classical voice recital and takes on the form of an informal cabaret act. Spoken introductions are used to give the songs a historical context and relate them personally to the singer. The specific composers and songs for the program were chosen as a result of the research conducted.

## **Acknowledgments**

Many thanks are due to Mr. Bill Jenkins, my thesis advisor, for help in choosing the material for this performance and for telling me “no” when I needed to hear it. Thank you Karri York for helping me musically prepare this performance. A thank you also goes to Jodi Cotton. A singer is helped tremendously when his or her accompanist is a singer as well. Thanks to Jerry Cole of the Ball State University Teleplex for arranging the recording and videotaping. Thank you finally to Dr. Raphael Lao for acting as a producer for this performance.

## **Artist's Statement**

Throughout my college career I have studied and performed both classical vocal music and musical theatre. I began as a vocal performance major and then became a musical theatre major with an on-and-off plan to attend graduate school for music. I love the intellectual and musical challenge of classical music, and I love the more popular-oriented styles of musical theatre. This thesis was intended to combine the two musical areas and perhaps find a middle ground in which to nestle myself professionally.

Through the process of creating this thesis, I have been exposed to a musical world that is somewhere in between grand opera and popular musical theatre. The purpose of my performance was to bring this world to a wider audience, an audience of my peers, and to demonstrate that opera and musical theatre are not mutually exclusive.

# Rynice Hanson

presents

## An Operatic Theatrical Honors Thesis Show

December 11, 2004 Pruis Hall 2:30 p.m.

accompanied by Jodi Cotton

Invocation and Instructions to the Audience	Stephen Sondheim
Medley: The Sun, Whose Rays are All Ablaze Sorry Her Lot Poor Wand'ring One	W.S. Gilbert Arthur Sullivan
Vilia	Franz Lehár English by Sheldon Harnick
Naughty Marietta	Victor Herbert
Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man	Oscar Hammerstein II Jerome Kern
The Man I Love	George and Ira Gershwin
Medley: It's a Grand Night for Singing Many a New Day What's the Use of Wonderin'	Oscar Hammerstein II Richard Rodgers
Barbara Song	Bertolt Brecht Kurt Weill English by Marc Blitzstein
Medley of selections from: Carmen Carmen Jones La Bohème Rent Aida Aida	Georges Bizet Georges Bizet Oscar Hammerstein II Giacomo Puccini Jonathan Larson Giuseppe Verdi Tim Rice Elton John

## Program Notes

In 1727, a poet was offered a menial post in the court of George II of England. In revenge for this slight, the poet created a musical show dripping with political satire. He wrote the text of the spoken dialogue and lyrics and his music compiler, John Christopher Pepusch, used popular ballads and songs of the time for the music. On January 29, 1728, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* premiered to great success. English audiences loved this new ballad opera for its satire, its songs, and the vernacular language which was so much more accessible than the Italian of traditional opera. Women bought fans named after the young female character Polly Peachum. The actors, unknown before the show, were catapulted into the public's admiring eye. *The Beggar's Opera* was an early step leading to a great team of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that would revolutionize the musical theatre of Europe and America.

William Schwenk Gilbert and Arthur Seymour Sullivan were brought together in 1871 by producer John Hollingshead to write an afterpiece called *Thespis*. Their next venture together in 1875 was produced by Richard D'Oyly Carte at the Royalty Theatre in Soho. *Trial by Jury* was only the forty-five minute opener for *La Perichole* by Offenbach, but a year later this little curtain raiser was still playing to standing room only audiences (Flinn 68-9). Gilbert and Sullivan had created English comic opera. D'Oyly Carte created the Comedy Opera Company in 1876 to produce the team's first full-length work. Their company and theatre grew tremendously in popularity once *H.M.S. Pinafore* reached America. Due to poor copyright laws, several badly-done imitations of their shows were being produced by several companies. Around one hundred different productions of *Pinafore*, three in New York alone, were simultaneously playing to

audiences throughout American in that year (89). In 1879, Gilbert, Sullivan, and D'Oyly Carte traveled to New York to put on an authentic production of *Pinafore*, and later the entire company brought over the English production of *Pinafore* along with the very first production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. For the American premiere of *The Mikado* in 1885, their entire English company secretly sailed to New York in order to have the copyright completely solid before any possible imitators could see the show. Throughout their partnership, Sullivan was frustrated in his desire to be known as a serious composer of grand opera. He eventually did break from Gilbert to write a grand opera, *Ivanhoe*, after the novel by Sir Walter Scott, but it didn't run as long as any of the teams' comic operas. Three years later the two were back together, but none of their later works paralleled their initial successes.

Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, European operettas were imported to the American stage. *Die Lustige Witwe* by Franz Lehár premiered in Vienna in 1905 and made its way to Broadway in 1907 as *The Merry Widow*. This show dictated the American audience's tastes for years to come. Months after its American premiere at least three companies of the show were touring the United States. Feathery oversized *Merry Widow* hats and other accessories were all the rage among women. The success of *The Merry Widow* paved the way for more translations of Viennese operetta, including Oscar Strauss' *The Chocolate Soldier* and Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus*. Composers in America, such as Victor Herbert, responded to the success of these imports by creating American operettas from the European models.

Victor Herbert was born in Ireland in 1859 and was classically trained in Germany and Vienna. When his wife was contracted to sing with the Metropolitan

Opera, he followed her to the U.S. to play cello in the Metropolitan Opera orchestra. Once there he became fascinated with the popular theatre stage. His list of works jumps back and forth from American operetta to comic extravaganzas such as the Ziegfeld Follies. *Naughty Marietta*, which was produced by Oscar Hammerstein I (the grandfather of Oscar Hammerstein II) in 1910, is a mixture of romance, inspired by such Viennese works as *the Merry Widow*, and vaudevillian comedy. Herbert was the musical giant of his day, composing a total of forty-two works, and was succeeded by a group of composers which included Sigmund Romberg and Rudolf Friml (Mordden 36).

Jerome Kern's earliest critical notice was due to some of his songs being interpolated into operettas and revues. Through these early experiences Kern learned to compose in the romantic, classically-inspired style of the Viennese operetta as well as the style of the Gilbert and Sullivan inspired English musicals which were written more for actors rather than singers. During the years of World War I, Kern partnered with Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse to create the Princess musicals, so named for the theatre in which they were produced. These shows were the step between the grand romantic stories of European operetta and the earthier, more contemporary plot lines of the musicals to come. After the breakup of this trio, Kern teamed up with Oscar Hammerstein II, who came from a family intimately involved with the opera scene in New York. His grandfather, Oscar Hammerstein I, was the impresario behind the Manhattan Opera House, which briefly held its own as a competitor of the Metropolitan. Kern and Hammerstein's collaborative efforts resulted in the groundbreaking musical, *Showboat*, which opened in New York in 1927. In his work, *American Musical Theatre: a Chronicle*, Gerald Bordman describes *Showboat* as "neither a Viennese operetta nor an

American musical comedy, it was the first real ‘musical play’” (485). In the book *Enchanted Evenings*, Geoffrey Block quotes Robert Simon’s discussion of Kern’s use of themes in an article he wrote for *Modern Music* in 1927, “Kern’s music heightens immeasurably the emotional value of the situation... Themes are quoted and even developed almost in Wagnerian fashion” (28).

Hammerstein returned to his family’s operatic roots in 1943 when he created a contemporary rendition of Bizet’s opera, *Carmen*, entitled *Carmen Jones*, for an African-American cast. In Hammerstein’s version of the story, which retained Bizet’s original score, Carmen is a worker in a parachute factory in the American South during World War II, Joe is an army corporal, Cindy Lou is the country girl who loves Joe, and Husky Miller is a boxer instead of a bull fighter.

Other composers of this time period were also looking to revamp old musical forms. George Gershwin, born in Brooklyn in 1898, wanted very much to be taken as a serious composer. To this end he took lessons in classical piano as well as composition, theory, and orchestration. His studies allowed him to create such instrumental works as *Rhapsody in Blue*, *An American in Paris*, and *Concerto in F*. Gershwin poured American musical styles such as jazz and blues into European molds. One of his great successes was the folk opera *Porgy and Bess*, one of the most well known American operas of today. Musicals such as *Of Thee I Sing* also show an operatic influence in their use of passages which could be called accompanied recitative or arioso, a style between recitative and aria (Block 63). The song “The Man I Love” was never actually performed in a Broadway version of a Gershwin musical. Nevertheless, it is hailed by Gershwin

musicologist Deena Rosenberg as the “first great song written for a new genre—the American musical” (Flinn 191).

After *Show Boat*, Oscar Hammerstein II worked with both musical comedy and operetta but never had as much success as he did in collaboration with Jerome Kern; that is until he was approached by a man named Richard Rodgers. Rodgers had taught himself to play piano by age six, began composing at age nine, and spent his teenage years at the Princess Theatre. He later attended the music school that would come to be known as Julliard. Rodgers’ twenty-five year partnership with lyricist Lorenz Hart ended in 1943 due to Hart’s battle with alcoholism, so Rodgers turned to his old acquaintance, Oscar Hammerstein II. Author Denny Martin Flinn described their partnership as, “the union...of the twin arms of the Broadway musical merged once and for all, Hammerstein being a descendent of the romantic operetta school, and Rodgers of the jazzy American musicals” (Flinn 220). Their first production as a team, *Oklahoma*, is credited as the maturation of what Kern and Hammerstein began with *Show Boat*. The two men made the book—the plot—of *Oklahoma* the most important element of the show, above the music and spectacle, thus creating the book musical. This show didn’t follow the normal pattern of a hit musical comedy complete with scantily clad dancing chorus girls, and neither did any other show they wrote together. Both Rodgers and Hammerstein were entirely focused on how to tell the story.

In 1900, in the German town of Dessau, a composer was born who would add his own operatically-influenced work to the American stage. Kurt Weill was a proficient pianist by age seven and began writing at age twelve. He became known in Germany for avant-garde concert works and his operas full of styles stolen from contemporary popular

music, such as American jazz. In the years between the two world wars, Weill met the poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht and the two eventually collaborated on a popular opera, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, a new version of John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. A poorly translated and poorly directed version of this work was presented in New York in 1933 and closed after only twelve performances. *The Threepenny Opera* had to wait for an Off-Broadway production in 1954 to win fame. Weill found no inspiration in the world of the Metropolitan Opera, so he instead created works for the Broadway stage which were a conglomeration of European operetta and American jazz. He collaborated with several lyricists, most notably Ira Gerswhin (*Lady in the Dark*), Langston Hughes (*Street Scene*, his most operatic musical), and Maxwell Anderson (*Lost in the Stars*).

Oscar Hammerstein II was able to further affect the course of musical theatre history when he took fifteen-year-old Stephen Sondheim as an apprentice of sorts. Sondheim later studied under Milton Babbitt, who was a proponent of musical serialism and with whom Sondheim searched for "structural foundations of theater composition" (Banfield 22). Sondheim is known for his wit and his intellectual composing style. The opening of "Invocation and Instructions to the Audience" was originally written for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, but instead it was expanded and used in a 1974 version of Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, which was performed in the Yale University swimming pool.

## Bibliography

- Banfield, Stephen. Sondheim's Broadway Musicals. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.
- Block, Geoffrey. Enchanted Evenings: The Musical From Showboat to Sondheim. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Bordman, Gerald. American Musical Theatre. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Flinn, Denny Martin. Musical! A Grand Tour. New York: Schirmer Books, 1997.
- Green, Stanley. Broadway Musicals: Show By Show. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1996.
- Kislan, Richard. The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theatre. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1980.
- Kreuger, Miles. Show Boat: The Story of a Classic American Musical. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Lamb, Andrew. 150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre. London: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Mates, Julian. America's Musical Stage: Two Hundred Years of Musical Theatre. London: Greenwood Press, 1985.
- Mordden, Ethan. Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre. New York: Grossman, 1976.
- Porter, Susan L. With An Air Debonair: Musical Theatre in America 1785-1815. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.
- Sanders, Ronald. The Days Grow Short: The Life and Music of Kurt Weill. New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston. 1980.