

Rodgers and Hammerstein

“The Sound of Music”

FAME IV (November 2007)

Costume: Peasant dress with apron

When you think of an opera, do you think of something formal (and maybe even boring?) that is sung in a foreign language? Today’s composers took the main ideas from opera and made them audience-friendly with the concept of “light opera” or what we commonly refer to as musical theatre.

Rodgers and Hammerstein were an American songwriting duo consisting of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. (*Show picture*) They are most famous for creating a string of immensely popular Broadway musicals in the 1940s and 1950s, during what is considered the “golden age” of musicals. Five of their shows were outstanding successes: “Oklahoma” (their first collaboration); “Carousel”; “South Pacific”; “The King and I”, and “The Sound of Music”. In all, among the many awards their shows and film versions received were 34 Tony Awards (for stage), 15 Academy Awards (for film), two Pulitzer Prizes (for writing), and two Grammys (for music).

Let’s listen to some of the most popular songs from “The Sounds of Music”. Listen carefully to see what instruments you recognize and if you can recognize the use of two elements of musical composition in particular: melody and dynamics. (*Melody – what you sing or hum along with; Dynamics – the music changing between soft and loud.*)

Play Track 1 – “The Sounds of Music” Did you hear how the sound built from very soft (pianissimo) to loud (forte) at the beginning of the song? What instruments could you hear? (*flutes/woodwinds, violins/strings, brass horns*)

And now a few more songs from *The Sound of Music* –

Play Track 2 “My Favorite Things” Which instruments stood out? (*Strings – did you hear them being plucked and bowed?*) Did you hear how the song used dynamics again?

Play Track 3 “Do-Re-Mi” Listen for a different string instrument than we’ve heard before (*guitar*). What happened with the dynamics? (*soft to loud*)

Play Track 4 “Edelweiss” – To this day, many people think this song is a traditional Austrian folksong, but it was actually written by Rodgers and Hammerstein. What instruments did you hear? (*Strings, including guitar, and bells at the very end*)

These two artists completely re-worked the musical theatre genre. Before they came along, musicals were whimsical and usually built around a particular person - a star. Because the efforts of Rodgers and Hammerstein were so successful, more musicals began containing thought-provoking plots, and every aspect of the play, dance, song and drama, was important to the plot. Their shows were so complete that they easily translated to the movie screen and their most notable successes are huge hits even today.

Let’s listen to a few more pieces of music that you may recognize. Play Track 5 – Compilation of “Oklahoma”, “Getting to Know You” from “The King and I”, and “Some Enchanted Evening” from “South Pacific”.

Let’s talk briefly about the traditional elements of opera and see how they translate into musical theatre. (*Show “Elements of Opera” poster*) Operas traditionally contain the following elements: Music, Story, Drama, Props and costumes, Dance. Rodgers and Hammerstein used these same elements for their stage productions. How many of you have ever seen “The Sound of Music” movie? It has all those same

elements. Their work resonated so strongly with audiences that the motion picture studios bought the rights to produce them for the big screen. Rodgers and Hammerstein were involved with the screenwriters of their shows and happily moved back and forth between the stage and the movie picture industry.

Richard Rodgers was the musical genius of the duo (“the composer”) and Oscar Hammerstein was the lyricist (he wrote the words). *The Sound of Music* probably contains more hit songs than any other Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, probably due more than anything to the phenomenal success of the film version - the most financially successful film adaptation of a Broadway musical ever made. Sadly, Hammerstein did not live to see the movie made. When Rodgers wrote two extra songs for the movie (“Confidence” and “Something Good”), he wrote the lyrics also.

In addition to their enduring work, Rodgers and Hammerstein were also honored in 1999 with a U.S. Postal Service stamp commemorating their partnership. (*Graphic is on the cart*)

Biographies –

Richard Rodgers' contributions to the musical theatre of his day were extraordinary. He was born in New York City in 1902 and his career spanned more than six decades. He began playing the piano when he was 6 years old and attended Columbia University, but dropped out in 1921 to attend the Juilliard School of Music. He wrote more than 900 published songs, and forty Broadway musicals with a series of partners. He was only one of two individuals to have ever won an Oscar, Grammy, Emmy, Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize. His daughter, Mary, and two of his grandsons went on to become composers as well.

He died at his home in New York City on December 30, 1979 at the age of 77 after suffering from cancer of the jaw and a heart attack. In March 1990 he was honored posthumously (after his death) with Broadway's highest accolade when the 46th Street Theatre was renamed “The Richard Rodgers Theatre”.

Oscar Hammerstein II is today considered one of the most important figures in the history of American musical theater. He was probably the best "book writer" in Broadway history - he made the story, not the songs or the stars, central to the musical. His reputation for being "sentimental," is based largely on the movie versions of the musicals, especially *The Sound of Music*. As recent revivals of *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and *The King and I* in London and New York show, Hammerstein was one of the more tough-minded and socially conscious American musical theater artists. Oscar Hammerstein believed in love, but he did not believe that it would always end happily.

Born in New York City in 1895, Hammerstein is the only person named Oscar ever to win an Oscar (Academy Award). He came from a family of performers – his grandfather was the famous theater founder, Oscar Hammerstein I, often called the “father of Times Square”. He attended Columbia University, like Richard Rodgers, but he quit law school to pursue theater. He had productive collaborations with many composers, but his greatest fame came from his partnership with Richard Rodgers.

Sadly, Hammerstein died of stomach cancer at his home in Pennsylvania shortly after the opening of *The Sound of Music* on Broadway. He never lived to see it made into the internationally loved movie that it became. The last song he ever wrote was “Edelweiss”. When Hammerstein died on August 23, 1960, he was universally mourned and the lights of Times Square in New York City, and London's West End were dimmed in recognition of his contributions to the musical during his funeral.