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Introduction

During the 2007–2008 academic year, the University of Kansas celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Murphy Hall, its music and theatre building. The occasion brought about fruitful collaborations between the two disciplines. In November 2007, there was a joint production of *The Music Man* (which had opened on Broadway fifty years before, in December 1957) and a corresponding symposium, "Musical Theatre in 1957." The latter brought together scholars from throughout the country to consider in detail the year that included the birth of *West Side Story* as well as *The Music Man*. Another part of the celebration in the Department of Music and Dance was a doctoral seminar on the Broadway musical in the 1950s. This collection of four essays came out of that seminar, where graduate students in musicology, performance, and music theory approached many shows from different angles. The seminar students, as well as the scholars who visited campus for the symposium, benefited greatly from how popular musical theatre scholarship has become in the last few decades, and in this issue of the *American Music Research Center Journal* the students are proud to offer their own contributions in this growing field.

The purpose of this introductory essay is to consider the nature of that field, what it is that scholars strive to achieve in their work on musical theater, a genre that millions enjoy as entertainment without scholarly explanations. It is axiomatic that one can love musicals like *West Side Story* and *The Music Man* without deep understanding of, for example, the show's history, its dramaturgy, the way the music helps to tell the story, or the principal influences upon the choreographer or director. Indeed, in the commercial theater, a show's success depends upon its accessibility on a single evening. For some, scholarly explication of a show would likely ruin it, but musicals are part of popular culture, and scholars have grown increasingly attracted to what American popular culture says about our society.[1] It is instructive to note the multi-layered ways that general audience members and scholars might regard musicals, a process described briefly below in glimpses at the two most famous shows that appeared in 1957.

West Side Story opened at the Winter Garden on 26 September 1957. Its status as an American popular icon did not occur until the highly successful film appeared in 1961, but the respect accorded the creators of the Broadway musical even in the show's first years helped raise *West Side Story*

above the status of a Broadway commercial success to an artistic plane. Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, and Stephen Sondheim created a modern take on Shakepeare's *Romeo and Juliet* told through words, music, and dance, with the three elements indivisible. The effect was a seamless, fast-paced evening of theater that required no explanation. Any interested audience member understood intuitively that the gang members were not strongly verbal, meaning that their self-expression came through the energy and physicality of dance. Tony and Maria expressed their love through song, from the exhilaration of "Tonight" to the hope for the future in "One Hand, One Heart." The violent emotional shifts that Maria and Anita feel in the scene of "A Boy Like That" and "I Have A Love," where Anita moves from despising Maria's love for Tony to trying to help the young lovers, are made more convincing by the musical journey provided by Bernstein and Sondheim. These gestures are plain and direct; no further explication is needed.

And yet, musical theater scholars persist and offer explanations. One can describe the dance movement vocabulary that Robbins used to help these non-verbal gang members communicate, such as spreading out their arms to show how they wish to own the "turf."[2] The songs for Tony and Maria are part of a score that is unified symphonically in a way that few Broadway musicals are. Those who explain this fact point, for example, to Bernstein's use of the "Somewhere" theme in the orchestra at the end of the balcony scene with the song "Tonight," or the tritone melodic interval on which Tony sings his lover's name in the song "Maria" being heard in the orchestra as the couple kisses in the song "One Hand, One Heart."[3] Many in the audience who could not articulate these musical associations experience them at some level when they see the show or listen to the recording. Musicologists also wish to explain the nature of the final scene between Anita and Maria, when the latter's music comes to dominate Anita, showing how she manages to gain her friend's assistance, a change of mind that would not have seemed possible in the violent intensity of "A Boy Like That."[4] Such descriptions raise one's awareness of the craft and creativity involved in producing a show like *West Side Story*.

The Music Man, which opened about three months after *West Side Story* and beat its rival out for the Tony for Best Musical the following spring, is a very different show, but it is also carefully wrought and includes the kind of dramatic and musical sophistication that interests scholars. With book, lyrics, and music all by Meredith Willson, it is unusually well integrated with consistent tone throughout. Before writing the show, Willson was famous as a radio music director and personality who relentlessly hyped his small town, Iowa background; his portrayal of River City, Iowa, (based on his hometown of Mason City) in *The Music Man* includes the charm and foibles of such places. The Broadway producers Ernie Martin and Cy Feuer, and the composer/lyricist Frank Loesser (and Willson's wife, Rini), convinced Willson to write what became *The Music Man*, and he worked on it for about six years.[5] One can view the show as based upon older musical comedies, but with especially memorable characters and a score that grows organical-

ly out of the plot. Robert Preston became a Broadway star with his origination of Harold Hill, the con man who comes to the Iowa town and meets his match in Marian Paroo (Barbara Cook), the librarian and piano teacher. There were other distinctive characters as well and the production also boasted a top-drawer design team, helping *The Music Man* bring the decade on Broadway to a close worth celebrating.

Then those pesky scholars of music theater sink their teeth into what might seem like a pleasant, traditional show and begin their commentary. That fascinating main character of Harold Hill was more than just a perfect portrayal by a fine actor. As a salesman—and a dishonest one, at that—Hill must be silver-tongued. Willson gives Hill his verbal edge by endowing him with examples of what he called "speak-song," rhythmic speech that is frequently unrhymed over an instrumental accompaniment.[6] This was different than Lerner and Loewe's solution for Rex Harrison's performance of Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*, where Loewe wrote a melody for most of a song and Harrison both spoke and sang.[7] Willson wrote some melodies for Hill, but for the most part he provided an interesting accompaniment for Preston to speak over. This is heard most effectively in "Ya Got Trouble" but also appears elsewhere, such as in the introduction to "Seventy-Six Trombones." Another interesting aspect of the score is that "Seventy-Six Trombones" and "Goodnight My Someone" are based on the same melody. Willson wrote the tune and discovered that it worked as well as a 6/8 march as it did as a waltz,[8] allowing for an interesting melodic association between the Harold and Marian. One also notes the diversity of music from the early years of the twentieth century that Willson worked into the score, and deft melodic writing. The story brings two outsiders together, and together they help establish a sense of community in a town desperately in need of one. Even if *The Music Man* is not high art and only good musical theater—obviously a debatable notion—it is a beautifully written show full of compelling ideas, characters, and music.

The four articles in this volume include detailed looks at the most important director of musicals from the 1930s until the 1960s, an Asian's look at *The King and I,* a singer's analysis of four actors who spoke their way through roles in the 1950s, and an analysis of Don Walker's orchestrations from several shows. Each of these authors brought special interest or expertise, a quality that made this a special seminar in my experience and rendered the final projects memorable.

The first article is Sylvia Stoner-Hawkins's consideration of George Abbott's career as a director of musicals. Stoner-Hawkins is a singer, actor, and director with experience in both opera and musical theater. In the seminar she showed interest in the practical side of Broadway history, including those on stage and behind the scenes. Abbott established himself as the leading director of musical comedies starting in the 1930s in several collaborations with Rodgers and Hart, and over the remainder of his career he directed many significant musical comedies. Stoner-Hawkins describes Abbott's work in a way that is helpful to those who, like her, work in the musical theater.

When Rodgers and Hammerstein chose to set the story of Anna Leonowens at the court of Siam in the 1860s, they accepted the difficult task of representing a non-Western culture on the American musical stage. They evoked the exotic in the show with such touches as unusual musical choices, Jerome Robbins's ballet "The Small House of Uncle Thomas," and a lavish stage production. How Asian they managed to make the show has been a matter of some debate,[9] and no matter how sensitive Rodgers and Hammerstein tried to be to cultural differences, they could not have produced a show that would be looked at similarly decades later. Hsun Lin, a musicology student from Taiwan, considers the character of the king in this show. She sees him as a nuanced character who makes choices necessary to his position, and she criticizes Anna for her inability to understand the king's needs.

Sharon Campbell earned a DMA in voice at the University of Kansas in 2008 and has joined the voice faculty of the University of Nebraska at Kearney. In the seminar she became fascinated by non-singing actors in famous musicals. Musical stage performers who are more dancers and/or actors than singers have existed for centuries, but the type became more problematic in the 1950s as a show's score played a larger role in storytelling than had generally been the case before. Performers had to "sing" numbers designed to tell the audience much about their characters, meaning that their renditions came under greater scrutiny. Campbell looks at Yul Brynner in *The King and I*, Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady*, Robert Preston in *The Music Man*, and Rosalind Russell in *Wonderful Town*. She brings to her analysis extensive professional experience as a singer and teacher, allowing her to provide an unusually detailed description of how these actors "sang."

Peter Purin, a PhD student in music theory and musical theater performer, has a special fascination with Broadway orchestrators, a topic that has hardly received its due from musical theater scholars.[10] One of the major problems is the lack of availability of full scores for Broadway shows. Purin chose to study Don Walker's orchestrations for varied shows from the 1950s. For example, he compares Walker's work on *The Pajama Game*, in the mold of older musical comedies, with *The Most Happy Fella,* a more operatic show. Purin listened closely to original cast recordings and bases his conclusions on analysis of those sources, although what is on the recordings might differ slightly from what audiences heard in the theatre. Since orchestrators work in teams, Purin was careful to deal only with tunes that Walker worked on, allowing for a useful description of his style as an orchestrator.

The four studies in this volume are part of the rapid growth of scholarly attention to the Broadway musical. The repertory of musicals is huge, providing a wealth of opportunities for musicologists, theorists, performer/scholars, and theater historians to explore and study. Those of us at the University of Kansas are grateful to the *American Music Research Center Journal*, its director Dr. Thomas Riis, and the journal's guest editor Dr. Graham Wood, for the opportunity to publish these fruits of our seminar.

Notes

1. One need only consider, for example, the amount of current musicological work appearing on aspects of popular music and film music found in many books and journals such as the *Journal of Popular Music Studies* and *Journal of Film Music*.

2. Stephen Sondheim reveals this detail in Mark Eden Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2003), 78.

3. For detailed analyses of the music from *West Side Story*, see: Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from 'Show Boat' to Sondheim* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 245–73, and Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey,* revised and expanded ed. (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2002), 221.

4. Swain, *The Broadway Musical*, 3–5.

5. Meredith Willson, *"But He Doesn't Know the Territory"* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1959). Willson addresses the suggestions from his Broadway colleagues on pp. 15–16, and spends much of the book on his six-year odyssey to bring *The Music Man* to the stage.

6. Willson, *"But He Doesn't Know the Territory,"* 48, 65.

7. See Sharon O'Connell Campbell, "The Actor's Voice: The Non-Singing Lead in Broadway Musicals of the 1950s."

8. Willson, *"But He Doesn't Know the Territory,"* 32.

9. See, for example, Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 261–68.

10. A recent, major study of Broadway orchestrators is Steven Suskin, *The Sound of Broadway Music: A Book of Orchestrators and Orchestrations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).