

# THE SOUND OF GESAMTKUNSTWERK

by Nick Richardson

Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts



Jerome Kern's *SHOW BOAT*, 1927

"I know what you mean when you speak of monotonous, unrhythmical melody... The reason lies not in the music but... in the language itself, in the verse. At present we have only inadequately formed verse, not the real thing," composer Richard Wagner lamented in 1851.

This incongruity between text and music was just one of Wagner's many frustrations with the state of opera in the mid-1800s. He felt that operagoers weren't there to appreciate the art; rather, the opera was primarily a social event for the upper class to see and be seen. Even worse, the artists, he believed, had lost sight of their responsibility as storytellers, producing superficial vehicles to show off the composers' and the performers' virtuosity.

Richard Wagner envisioned a Gesamtkunstwerk, or "total artwork" that unified all forms of art — music, visual arts, dance and poetry — with no single medium taking precedence over the others. He proposed an interdisciplinary form that would bring individuals from all social classes together as a single audience to confront humanity's current issues and crises. Wagner took inspiration from the ancient Greeks, for whom attending the theater was both a social function and a religious ritual. Watching a tragedy purged the people of fear and united them in a shared ethics. The Greeks employed poetry, music and spectacle, all in service of the plot. Wagner put his theories and values into practice when composing and staging the Ring cycle for the Bayreuth Festival — a Gesamtkunstwerk of four operas performed over four days in a theater modeled on ancient Greek amphitheaters.

## The Kern-el of a New American Art Form

Around 50 years later, composer Jerome Kern observed the same sort of artistic divide in New York as Wagner noted in Germany. Most of the entertainment on Broadway in the early 1900s consisted of vaudeville, musical revues, burlesque and

blackface minstrelsy. In one evening you could see a hodgepodge of singing, dancing, comedy acts and more, but without a plot or structure organizing the acts. The burgeoning genre of "musical comedy" had a loose plot with continuous characters, but often departed from the narrative to feature a singer's signature tune, a comedian's bit, or a dance break.

Unlike his contemporaries, Kern studied composition in the United States, England and Germany, which exposed him to Wagner and other classical composers. As lyricist Dorothy Fields remembers, "He always had next to him on the piano a basket of pencils and a little bust of Wagner." Inspired by Wagner's idea of Gesamtkunstwerk, Kern envisioned a new form that utilized music, lyrics and dance cohesively to tell a story. His 1927 musical *Show Boat*, with lyrics and book by Oscar Hammerstein II, pioneered the "musical play:" a script-driven musical supported by songs and dances that furthered the action.

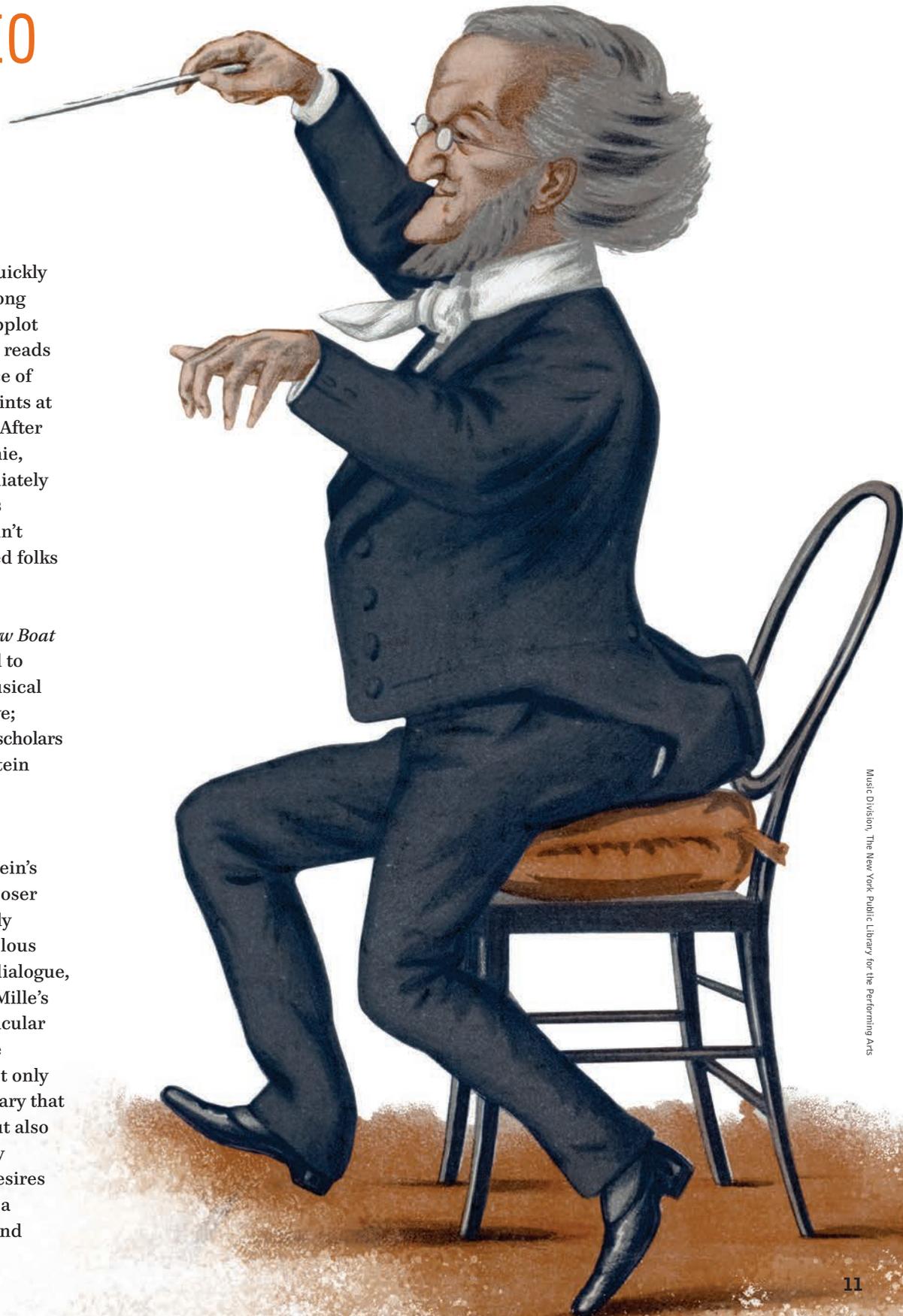
Perhaps the best example of music, dialogue, and dance coming together to serve the plot in *Show Boat* is "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," which leading lady Julie sings to Magnolia, the daughter of Cap'n Andy. Magnolia confesses her first crush to Julie, but Julie warns Magnolia to tread cautiously out

# Wagner to Kern to R & H

of fear that she will fall too quickly and too deeply in love. The song plays a central role in the subplot surrounding Julie's race. She reads as white, but her performance of "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" hints at her mixed-race background. After Julie sings the chorus, Queenie, the boat's black cook, immediately becomes suspicious of Julie's heritage, commenting, "I didn't ever hear anybody but colored folks sing dat song."

Kern and Hammerstein's *Show Boat* may truly be the first musical to unify script and song, the musical numbers driving the narrative; however, most historians and scholars recognize another Hammerstein work as the first "integrated" Broadway musical.

*Oklahoma!* (1943), Hammerstein's first collaboration with composer Richard Rodgers, immediately garnered praise for its marvelous integration of music, lyrics, dialogue, dance and design. Agnes de Mille's choreography marked a particular achievement in dance for the musical. Her dream ballet not only utilized a movement vocabulary that conveyed a sense of place, but also propelled the plot forward by illustrating the characters' desires and fears. *Oklahoma!* proved a winning recipe for Rodgers and





Mary Martin as Nellie Forbush in Rodgers & Hammerstein's **SOUTH PACIFIC**, 1949

Hammerstein, and it ushered in the “Golden Age” of American musical theater. The duo, along with other artists of the day (Alan Jay Lerner and Fritz Loewe, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, Jerry Herman, Jule Styne, Leonard Bernstein and others), continued to crystallize the form from the 1940s through the 1960s.

## “So Long, Farewell”

Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote 10 musicals together, including *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I* and *Cinderella*. *The Sound of Music* (1959) was their final collaboration before Hammerstein passed away in 1960, and they ended their partnership with a masterpiece. Nearly every song in *The Sound of Music* is not only a memorable hit, but also serves the storytelling.

Before Maria leaves the abbey to become a governess, she and the Mother Abbess sing “My Favorite Things” as a duet. “My Favorite Things” is introduced as an old folk song that the Mother Abbess had forgotten from her youth, but she recalls it thanks to Maria’s singing in

the abbey. “My Favorite Things” not only gives the Mother Abbess some background characterization, but also develops the bond of friendship and trust between her and Maria. The Mother Abbess of the stage is not the sage but stern disciplinarian of the film; rather, she has heart and is able to empathize with Maria’s difficulties adjusting to life in the abbey. When Maria later suffers from a bout of nerves before entering the von Trapp home, she sings a verse of “My Favorite Things,” and then, as the song goes, she doesn’t feel so bad.

Dance is also a crucial storytelling device in *The Sound of Music*. The musical uses dance at the critical juncture where Maria and the Captain recognize their romantic feelings for each other. The Captain hosts a party at his villa to introduce his friends to Baroness Elsa von Schraeder, his new fiancé. His youngest son, Kurt, invites Maria to dance the Ländler (an Austrian folkdance). When Kurt makes a mistake, the Captain intervenes and replaces Kurt in the dance. Maria’s and the Captain’s emotions come to



Scene from the original stage production of **OKLAHOMA!**, 1943-1949

the surface and are on full display by the end of the dance — their embracing bodies unearth a physical chemistry between the pair, and we, the audience, experience that realization along with them. Though Maria can’t name this new wave of feelings, the ever-wise middle child, Brigitta, points out that Maria’s cheeks are flushed: “The way you looked at him just now when you were dancing. You’re in love with him.”

## That’s (More Than) Entertainment!

Even as Maria’s love for the children and for the Captain grows, Rodgers and Hammerstein do not let us forget the rising tide of Nazism that soon invades Austria. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* not only managed to bring together various art forms to tell stories, but also used those stories to address social issues of their time.

*South Pacific* argues that racism isn’t innate, but rather taught. *The King and I* reverses the Orientalist gaze to call “Western People Funny” instead. Kern and Hammerstein’s *Show Boat* was one of the first theatrical works to represent mixed-race marriages with sympathy — a daring move in 1927. Wagner aimed for this contemporary relevancy as well; he chose the Nordic myth of the Nibelung as his subject matter for the Ring cycle for its relationship to the Germans’ struggle for unification and a national identity. Though the settings of their works crossed time and place, all of these artists aimed to address their present-day audiences by combining art forms to tell a story, much like the ancient Greeks before them.



**Yul Brynner (The King) and Gertrude Lawrence (Anna Leonowens) in THE KING AND I, 1951**

social consciousness. The common criticism that musicals are light entertainment, simple or even fluff points to their phenomenal craftsmanship: the seamless blending of multiple art forms makes the work look easy and effortless, obscuring the labor of its creators. With its roots in Germany and even ancient Greece, musical theater is one of the very few uniquely American contributions to art, and *The Sound of Music* remains a prime example of our American Gesamtkunstwerk.

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**Mary Martin and the children in THE SOUND OF MUSIC, 1959**

## From stage to screen to stage again: what's lost, what's gained in a stage-to-film adaptation

The 1965 film adaptation of *THE SOUND OF MUSIC* starring Julie Andrews certainly popularized the musical, but the film varies slightly from the original stage version. What does Maria sing during the thunderstorm if not "My Favorite Things"? She sings "The Lonely Goatherd" with the children, assuaging their fears and encouraging their increasing sense of play, so long suppressed by the Captain. "The Lonely Goatherd" in the film does not further the plot much (if at all). It's posed as entertainment for the Captain, the Baroness and Max, but it's largely a showcase piece for Bil Baird's puppetry. In this light, the stage musical actually proves to use the songs more effectively when it comes to furthering the plot.

The stage version also more prominently presents the growing fascism outside of Austria. In Act II, the Captain, the Baroness and Max discuss the best course of action should Nazis from Germany invade. The Baroness and Max believe they should acquiesce in order to protect themselves, saying there's "No Way to Stop It." The Captain, on the other hand, vows to defy the Nazis should they invade. This political split is important because it illustrates the Captain's incompatibility with the Baroness, which makes Maria a more viable partner. The musical hints at this mismatch earlier in Act I in "How Can Love Survive?", in which the Baroness and Max claim that two rich people can't maintain a romance because neither of them have anything to lose. Neither song was included in the film version.

Also missing from the film is "An Ordinary Couple," Maria and the Captain's original love duet. Rodgers wrote a new duet to replace it: "Something Good." He also wrote "I Have Confidence," Maria's affirmation as she travels from the abbey to the von Trapp family home. Notably, these two songs are the only ones with music and lyrics by Rodgers alone; Hammerstein had already passed away before work on the film began. Both "Something Good" and "I Have Confidence" will appear in the Festival's production of *THE SOUND OF MUSIC* next summer. —NR