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Broadway!



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Broadway!

Is there any street in the world that instantly conjures up such evocative and memorable images? From Battery Park to the Bronx, Broadway snakes up the entire length of Manhattan; but for most people, the real Broadway consists of about 15 blocks from 42nd to 57th street on which or near which most of the commercial theatres are located. Broadway has been home of theatres since the 19th century, when the theatres were located further south, clustered around and above Broadway and 14th street. As municipal development gradually moved north, so did the theatres, and the present arrangement of theatres was mostly in place by the 1920's.

The music from Broadway musicals was central to popular culture from the late 19th century until at least 1970, when Rock and other forms of popular music supplanted Broadway as the main engine of popular music. In particular, from about 1920 on, the great songs of the American Songbook, composed by George and Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers with Lorenz Hart and later Oscar Hammerstein and many others, often found their first home on the Broadway stage. With a few exceptions, most of the shows written before Rodgers and Hammerstein's **Oklahoma** (1943) are not familiar to us, but the beautiful songs they contained are still part of our heritage and represent some of the best American music ever written. Of course, since **Oklahoma**, the book musical—where story, music, characters, dance and other aspects of a show are meant to create an integrated whole—has been the norm. Thus we love the songs of Cole Porter and George Gershwin but rarely associate them with the show they were written for. On the other hand, those of us who love “Some Enchanted Evening” know it comes from **South Pacific**.

Our concert tonight features an array of great music from three eras of Broadway: first, the era before 1920 with the music of George M. Cohan. Second, the era of the Great American Songbook—1920 to approximately 1950—with the music of George Gershwin. And finally, we celebrate the era of the Book Musical, from 1943 to the present, with music by Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, and Jule Styne.

Suite of Songs by George M. Cohan (arr. Wendel)

George M. Cohan was perhaps the most remarkable theatre personality whose career began before the 1920's. Writer, composer, lyricist, dancer, actor, producer—he did it all. Beginning in 1904, with **Little Johnny Jones**, Cohan (his Irish name is pronounced with the accent on the

second syllable) wrote, starred in and produced 50 Broadway shows and wrote 300 songs, including “Over There”, Yankee Doodle Dandy”, and “It’s a Grand Old Flag”. There is a statue of him in Times Square—the only statue in the Theatre District celebrating a performer. In later years he earned renown as a straight actor, performing the lead in Eugene O’Neil’s only comedy, **Ah, Wilderness**.

If you have never seen Jimmy Cagney’s astonishing performance as Cohan in the biopic “Yankee Doodle Dandy” (1942), you simply must find it and watch it! Anyone who doesn’t smile during Cagney’s dance recreation of the title song from the movie might need help. Cohan, shown the movie just before his death, was supposed to have remarked that Cagney was an impossible act to follow, even for him! Lesser known, but equally charming, is Cagney, reprising his role as Cohan, dancing on a tabletop with Bob Hope in **The Seven Little Foys**.

West Side Story Overture Glitter and Be Gay from *Candide*

Leonard Bernstein

Like George Gershwin, Bernstein was at home in both the theatre and in the world of Classical composition. Like Gershwin, he had his breakthrough success at the age of 25—Gershwin with **Rhapsody in Blue** (1924) and Bernstein with overnight fame as the substitute for the ill Bruno Walter as conductor of the New York Philharmonic on a national radio broadcast (1943). Finally, each musician had a second remarkable success in the very same season—Gershwin with **Lady, Be Good** (1924), his first Broadway musical written with his brother Ira; and Bernstein with his first composing successes, the ballet **Fancy Free** and the musical **On the Town** (1944). But unlike Gershwin, Bernstein moved away from his early theatre origins to concentrate on his Classical career as both a composer and of course conductor. Before doing so he wrote both **Candide**, a work filled with brilliant music, however difficult to stage, and of course, **West Side Story** (1957), one of the greatest book musicals ever written.

Stephen Sondheim, the young untested lyricist working on his first big show, has written eloquently about the enormous clash of personalities between the mercurial director/choreographer Jerome Robbins and Bernstein, not a shy wallflower himself. Somehow, out of this tension, grew this extraordinary musical, which can seem as fresh today as over 60 years ago. The Overture we hear tonight shows us both the melodic charm and also the tense, modern sounds of conflict that underscore this musical. The present controversial restaging of this great work underscores how modern this icon of the 1950’s still is.

Candide might well be the best musical that couldn’t quite become a major hit. There is too much music; it is more an opera than a musical. And the arc of the plot follows Voltaire’s story from innocence and happiness ending in disillusion, despair, and grim acceptance of fate—pretty much the opposite arc of most successful musicals back then—although to be fair, **West Side Story** also ends in tragedy. At any rate, what survives is the music, and tonight’s aria, “Glitter and Be Gay”, shows us why **Candide** is so admired in spite of its problems.

“Stranger in Paradise” from *Kismet* Polovetsian Dances

Alexander Borodin

There are occasional examples of classical melodies becoming popular songs—“I’m Forever Chasing Rainbows” comes from a Chopin Impromptu. Billy Joel has gone to Beethoven’s **Piano**

Sonata “Pathétique” for a significant portion of his song “This Night”. But **Kismet** (1953) is one of the few Broadway musicals to owe all of its melodies to one classical composer. The creative team of Charles Lederer and Luther Davis had success in 1944 creating a musical, **Song of Norway**, based on the music of Edvard Grieg. **Kismet**, based on a non-musical play from 1911 by Edward Knoblock, uses melodies drawn from the works of Russian composer Alexander Borodin. It was even more successful and was made into a film starring Howard Keel a few years later.

Borodin was one of the late 19th-century Russian composers seeking to establish a national school of composition, along with Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and others. Incidentally, he never became a professional musician, but was a very successful chemist in St. Petersburg.

The team for **Kismet** chose wisely and his melodies, from a number of his orchestral works, work beautifully on the musical stage. “Stranger in Paradise”, comes from a melody from Borodin’s “Polovetsian Dances”, which is part of a larger work, Borodin’s opera Prince Igor, an epic tale recounting the conflict between the Russian **Prince Igor** versus the Polovetsian peoples in the 12th century. The opera remained unfinished when he died and was only completed when Rimski-Korsakov took on the project out of his deep respect for Borodin. The Dances, at least partly orchestrated by Rimski-Korsakov, have always been popular as a stand-alone work, and it is very enjoyable to hear the original source music for the musical.

Overture to Gypsy (arr. Wenzel)

Jule Styne

For some reason, Jule Styne is not as well known as other legends of Broadway. Perhaps this is because his early successes were in Hollywood, often viewed as a slightly-less prestigious vehicle for artistic excellence. Styne labored in Hollywood for years, and came to the notice of Frank Sinatra, for whom he wrote some wonderful songs, including “Guess I’ll Hang my Tears Out to Dry”. A short list of his great songs include “Just in Time”, “Make someone Happy”, “Three Coins in the Fountain”, and of course the Barbra Streisand vehicle, “People”, from **Funny Girl**. (Trivia fans might be interested that she was the fourth person considered for her signature role in **Funny Girl**, after Ann Bancroft, Eydie Gorme, and Carol Burnett). Most people consider **Gypsy** Styne’s greatest work. It is certainly the most dramatic and memorable. Few who saw Ethel Merman sing “Rose’s Turn” will ever forget it. Styne’s collaborator was, again, Stephen Sondheim, who initially turned it down, not wanting to be typecast as only a lyricist. Thankfully, his mentor, Oscar Hammerstein, convinced him to work with Styne and the resulting musical is one of the finest from the 1950’s.

Send in the Clowns

Stephan Sondheim

Of course Sondheim managed to avoid being typecast as a lyricist, breaking out as a composer/lyricist first with the comedy **A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum** and then in a series of brilliant and frequently acerbic musical commentaries on modern life and relationships. So interwoven are his plots and his music that it in spite of his brilliance as a composer he has almost never had a hit song extracted from one of his shows. The exception is tonight’s offering from the great master of the Broadway musical, “Send in the Clowns”, from **A Little Night Music**. This rueful account of a relationship seemingly doomed by differences in temperament touches a chord so deep that it has been recorded by hundreds of singers most notably by early recordings by Judy Collins and Frank Sinatra.

I Got Rhythm An American In Paris

George Gershwin

What, you may ask, is Gershwin's orchestral masterpiece, **An American in Paris**, doing on a concert devoted to music from Broadway? Well, there is a connection, as we will see. By 1928, only four years after his phenomenal success with **Rhapsody in Blue**, he was an international celebrity, and was meeting the most important musicians and artists of his day. On travels to France he met Maurice Ravel and other important French musicians—Poulenc, Honegger, Milhaud and other members of the French avant-garde. There was much mutual affection, and Gershwin resolved to write a composition that would, in part, imitate the new French idiom, combining it of course with his characteristic American sound.

This piece is in the European form of the **tone poem**--a one-movement work with a literary or non-musical idea behind it. The idea here is that Gershwin imagines an American tourist in Paris. First, the tourist enjoys the street scene—including the unique Paris taxicab horns and sounds of the cafes including a brief "Can-can". Later, more melancholy sections indicate the tourist's homesickness. Later on, the fast melody that enters is one of his great ragtime melodies, here symbolizing home for the American.

Of course, Gene Kelly choreographed the composition for the sophisticated Hollywood musical from 1951, **An American in Paris**. This film is one of a number of films and stage musicals created after Gershwin's untimely death in 1937 at the age of 38 that use Gershwin's songs in new contexts and new plots. Gershwin's songs are brilliant, but most of the original musicals are too old-fashioned to revive as written. Thus, the effort to create new plots in which Gershwin's songs can be recycled. In the movie, for example, Kelly does a wonderful, charming dance to amuse French children to Gershwin's wonderful song "I Got Rhythm", which was first heard in his Broadway musical from 1930, **Girl Crazy**. His quiet, almost gentle version of the vocals contrasts with the amazing original version, performed by newcomer Ethel Merman, who was certainly one singer who never needed a microphone!

Gene Kelly's concept to choreograph Gershwin's tone poem written for the concert hall in 1928 was inspired. Kelly used almost the entire Gershwin composition in a lengthy and brilliant ballet sequence juxtaposing large Parisian crowd scenes, a love duet (Gershwin might have thought of the beautiful melody here as representing homesickness but Kelly and Leslie Caron had other ideas), and a café scene filled with recreations of famous French paintings. So powerful is this ballet that many people think that Gershwin must have written the piece for the ballet. Although Gershwin did not intend the piece for a ballet, I think he would have enjoyed Kelly's brilliant work.

In 2014, a stage version loosely based on the movie, again combining a number of Gershwin songs from different musicals, opened in Paris and then, a year later, on Broadway. Although the creative team wisely did not try to copy the movie ballet, the musical follows the general outline of the movie plot (which was written by Alan Jay Lerner, of Lerner and Lowe). The show was a significant success, running over 600 performances. Thus this selection qualifies as appropriate for our salute to Broadway!

Program notes by Orin Grossman