

Class 1: European Visitors

Introduction

1. Class title 1 (European Visitors)
1w Osher information
1x Course title (*Merry Widow*)

Note my title and subtitle. I picked “The Birth of Broadway” largely for alliteration rather than accuracy; the subtitle is more to the point. Of all the angles I could take on American musical theater, I chose to focus on how the fantasy of European operetta at the beginning of the twentieth century got changed into a more or less realistic view of American life by the middle of it. Not that there weren’t fanciful works in the later part of the century also; there were. And not that Broadway did not contain shows of many other types around 1900; I’ll mention some of those next week.

- 1y Course title (as above, altered)

To pursue this theme, I need to go from about 1890 to 1970. This means that the actual Birth of Broadway—around 1900 and before—is actually quite short; a better title would be “The **Growth** of Broadway.” Yes, I could spend more time on the earlier period and give you a bunch of facts—but I couldn’t play much music, as it simply hasn’t been recorded, and I reckon that’s what you want.

2. Lehár: *The Merry Widow* (Met 2015), end of overture [1:13]

That was the opening of a production of *The Merry Widow* (1905), the most famous operetta of Hungarian composer **Franz Lehár** (1870–1948). This actual production comes from 2015 at the Metropolitan Opera; I’ll be showing a whole lot more of it after the break; generally, these classes will contain one featured work plus supporting material. But the date on the screen, 1907, is when the show first came to Broadway. It was a huge hit, running for a then-unheard-of 416 performances. You could say that American musical theater took off from this point—glamorous romantic fantasies set in an idealized *Belle Époque* Europe. All the other classes in this course will deal exclusively with American composers, but today I want to look at some of the *European* forebears from which operettas like *The Merry Widow* sprang.

3. Opera, *Singspiel*, operetta, and Broadway

Let’s stop to define some terms. Ideally **Opera** is drama that takes place entirely through music. Although the mechanical facts of the plot may be conveyed by less formal recitative between the musical numbers (arias, duets, and so forth), the *emotional* through-line is carried entirely through the music. Opera requires singers trained to project over a symphonic orchestra. **Singspiel** in German or **Opéra comique** in France is a kind of opera in which the numbers are linked by spoken dialogue. Although the plots are often comic, as in *The Magic Flute*, this is not always so; the tragedy *Carmen* is

also classified as an *opéra comique*. **Operetta** is simply a subdivision of that, with plots that are invariably comic or romantic, a higher proportion of dialogue, and a lot more dancing. Since the subjects are generally closer to fantasy, it is no longer so important that each musical number should advance the plot, and for many roles acting chops are more important than classical vocal training. These differences increased with the development of the **Broadway musical**; orchestras shrank, acting and dancing were the keys to casting rather than vocal power, and in the bigger shows theatrical spectacle became more and more important.

4. Roger Brunyate directing *A Postcard from Morocco* in 1984

A word about myself. Between the ages of 27 and 72, I had a career directing operas, and also writing the texts for a few, so this is a field I know inside out. Along the way, I have many contacts with *Singspiel* and quite a few with operetta, especially Gilbert and Sullivan. I have seen quite a few Broadway shows, but have directed only three (not, of course, on Broadway itself). So I make no claim to being an expert, and there may well be fans here who know a good bit more than I do myself. But I *am* an expert on how you put words and music together and make them work on the stage, so I hope you will join me in a voyage of discovery as I journey from this knowledge into a field that, in many respects, is largely new.

5. Menu slide

Here are the four pieces I am going to touch on today; the dates under each are years of their original creation and when they first came to New York. The father of European operetta is the German-French composer, **Jacques Offenbach** (1819–80). He was one of the inspirations for the team of **WS Gilbert** (1836–1911) and **Arthur Sullivan** (1842–1900) in Britain, whose 14 operettas were equally popular in this country. But the main line of development moved from Paris to Vienna, where the *genre* we most typically think of as operetta was developed by such composers as **Johann Strauss II** (1825–99) and, a little later, **Franz Lehár** (1870–1948). I will generally give one piece in each class a full hour.

A. **La vie Parisienne** [10:10]

6. Section title A (Lacroix production of *La vie Parisienne*) [0:08]

Jacques Offenbach came to Paris from Cologne, Germany, where his father was a cantor. He enrolled in the Paris Conservatoire, but did not take to formal study, so left and made his living as a cellist and later as a conductor. Meanwhile, he had started writing what eventually became over 100 operettas, all comic, mostly short, and all originally confined to four characters, since this was all the censorship of the time permitted. Finding no luck with the established *Opéra Comique*, he rented his own theatre to present his works as triple bills; they soon became very popular.

7. Offenbach portrait, and list of works

His full-length works as the restrictions were lifted were the classical parodies *Orpheus in the Underworld* and *La belle Hélène*. But I have chosen to play *La vie Parisienne*, which deals with

contemporary life. This still contains something of the triple-bill flavor, introducing several new characters each act, and developing their stories over a 25-minute arch, largely independent of whatever connecting narrative nominally links the whole. In this case, I won't even bother trying to summarize the plot, but instead play excerpts from the first and last acts, focusing on what Offenbach does so well, the upbeat ensembles to which everything builds.

8. Pelly and Lacroix production

But I'm in a quandary. I had hoped to show you a production set in the 1860s when Offenbach wrote it. Of the two DVDs on the market, one is updated, quite brilliantly but that's not useful here. The other is nominally in period, but is filled out with clowns and others in weird costumes as though the director (the couturier **Christian Lacroix**) is emphasizing that this is a zany farce in which nothing makes sense. Nevertheless, I will play two excerpts from the latter. The first comes from the end of act one, where people are arriving from all ends of the earth, among them a fabulously rich **Brazilian** who intends to spend his money on having a good time. I play it as an example of the rapid-patter **entrance aria** that was to become such a fixture in Gilbert and Sullivan.

9. Offenbach: *La vie Parisienne*, Act I, Brazilian's entrance [4:39]

Believe it or not, the Brazilian does not appear again until well on in Act Five. Here is the scene where he does. He has picked up a girlfriend, and their snappy duet leads into an upbeat finale that ends in another Offenbach specialty, the can-can. I generally put the singers' name on the handout.

10. Offenbach: *La vie Parisienne*, Act V, Brazilian's exit [4:40]

B. H.M.S. Pinafore [10:25]

11. Section title B (ENO *Pinafore*) [0:08]

12. Savoy opera posters

Two writers most obviously influenced by Offenbach were the English librettist **William Schwenk Gilbert** (1836–1911) and composer **Arthur Seymour Sullivan** (1842–1900). Brought together by **Richard D'Oyly Carte** (1844–1901), the impresario of the Savoy Theatre (and hotel), they produced a series 14 light operas collectively known as the **Savoy Operas**. "Opera" is perhaps a misnomer; these were operettas, very much in the Offenbach mode. But the differences were significant. Gilbert was a far better playwright than any of Offenbach's collaborators, and rather than being episodic, his plays developed a single idea (however absurd) and a single genre consistently from beginning to end. *HMS Pinafore*, for example, takes place entirely upon a Royal Navy man-of-war moored in Portsmouth harbour.

13. Still from a more recent Stratford production

Furthermore, these ideas always involved some element of political or social satire. The satire in this case is pointing out that cabinet appointments in Gilbert's day were given out to political cronies

regardless of qualifications for the actual job (sound familiar?). So **Sir Joseph Porter KCB** has risen from articled clerk to provincial politician to his present position as **First Lord of the Admiralty**, or as he calls it, “The ruler of the Queen’s Navee.” And this despite never having been to sea himself! Furthermore, he arrives with a chorus of womenfolk—“his sisters and his cousins and his aunts”—and insists that the ship’s company follow with the etiquette of a Victorian drawing room. For example, the Captain must follow each of his orders with a polite “If you please.” Here he is, played by **Eric Donkin**, singing a rapid-patter entrance aria very much like Offenbach’s Brazilian.

14. Gilbert and Sullivan: *HMS Pinafore* (Stratford 1981), Sir Joseph’s entrance [3:54]

15. *HMS Pinafore* poster

Pinafore became a hit in America almost as soon as it has premiered in London. But it first appeared in Boston, in a pirated production. Others quickly sprung up elsewhere. When the D’Oyly Carte company came over with their official production, there were no fewer than *eight* unofficial productions running within a 5 block radius! The D’Oyly Cartes indeed had a success, but it was short-lived; too many people had already seen one of the pirated versions. Trouble was, there was no universal law of copyright at the time; American courts held that the publication of a show was permission for anyone to put it on. I think there was an exception for when the show was actually playing in an American theater. For this reason, D’Oyly Carte premiered the next Gilbert and Sullivan opera, *The Pirates of Penzance*, in New York rather than in London, although there was a token performance the night before in a small theater in Penzance itself to secure British copyrights as well. But I rather think that the piracy issue bedeviled Gilbert and Sullivan in America for decades. It is proof, I suppose, of their popularity.

16. Trio, “Never mind the why and wherefore,” in an amateur production

Let’s hear what is probably the most famous number in the score, the trio, “Never mind the why and wherefore.” **Captain Corcoran** of the *Pianafore* has a daughter, **Josephine**, and one purpose of Sir Joseph’s visit is to woo her. But she is already in love with a common sailor, and so refuses him. Sir Joseph assumes that her refusal is because he is so far above her himself, and assures her, officially, that “Love levels all ranks.” But she takes this as permission to marry beneath her, so all three join in celebration of what they *imagine* is a done deal.

17. Gilbert and Sullivan: *HMS Pinafore* (Stratford 1981), the Bell Trio [3:27]

C. Die Fledermaus [10:40]

18. Section title C (Met *Fledermaus*) [0:08]

19. Johann Strauss and first American poster

Perhaps as a result of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), the locus of operetta shifted from Paris to Vienna. And it was **Viennese operetta**, rather than the French or English varieties that presided at the Birth of Broadway, partly due to the New York success of works like *Die Fledermaus* and *The Merry Widow*, partly due to the fact that so many of the great immigrant composers, like **Sigmund Romberg** and **Rudolf Friml**, came from Eastern Europe where Vienna reigned as the presiding metropolis.

20. Act II of Die Fledermaus

Johann Strauss II (1825-99) wrote several operettas, but the one that most clearly defines the genre is *Die Fledermaus* of 1874. The name means "the bat," a relatively minor plot detail that I won't bother to explain. Indeed, I won't explain most of the plot details, because they are numerous and confusing. But they are not needed for me to show you the characteristic atmosphere and textures that make not only this, but most such operettas distinctively Viennese.

21. — the above with topic headings [0:07]

Most Viennese opera is **white-tie**: that is to say it contains scenes in upper-class settings that most of the audience would never attain. And this might well be **fantasy**. The second act of *Die Fledermaus* takes place at a ball given by the fabulously rich **Prince Orlofsky**. But all the guests whose names we know are either middle or lower-class: the principal character **Eisenstein** is pretending to be a French count; his wife **Rosalinde** pretends to be an Hungarian countess, and their maid **Adele** pretends to be an actress. Key to this atmosphere of upwardly-mobile wish fulfillment is the ubiquitous presence of the **Viennese waltz**, of which Strauss was the acknowledged master. And finally—a Viennese quality you don't get in Offenbach or Sullivan at all—the recurrent strain of **nostalgia**.

22. Malena Ernman and Wolfgang Windgassen as Prince Orlofsky in Die Fledermaus

Prince Orlofsky, the host of this party, is written to be sung by a mezzo-soprano dressed as a man. But in this 1980 production from Vienna, the role is given to the reigning Wagnerian tenor of the 1950s and 1960s, **Wolfgang Windgassen**. He launches the Act II finale with a toast to Champagne, an upbeat number with everybody joining in. Then we get the slow nostalgic ensemble, so quintessentially Viennese, "Brüderlein und Schwesterlein"; the singer is **Heinz Holecek**. Then a dance, which I'll cut. Then the famous waltz. And finally, as the clock strikes, the characters hurry away as they have somewhere to be before dawn. In between all this, you will hear short exchanges furthering the subplots, but since I have not told you what these are, just sit back and admire Strauss's skill at knitting all this together.

23. Strauss: *Die Fledermaus* (Vienna), Act II finale [13:02]

24. Class title 2 (still from the above)

In the Break...

24w Website 1

24x Website 2

24y Website 3

24z Information slide (repeat)

D. The Merry Widow [11:10]

25. Section title D (Act II of the Met production) [0:08]

In this hour, I am simply going to run through some fairly extensive extracts from *The Merry Widow* with minimum comments. One of the common tropes of European operetta is that some of the characters should hail from plausible but distant countries in Europe that lend a touch of exoticism. We heard Rosalinde in *Die Fledermaus* sing a *czardas* pretending to be a Hungarian Countess. **Hanna Glawari**, the title character of *The Merry Widow*, hails from the imaginary **Pontevedro**, supposedly somewhere in the Balkans. Her husband's death has left her fabulously rich, and the mainspring of the plot is to ensure that she marry a fellow Pontevedrian, so that all this capital will remain in the country. Right now, we are in Paris, near which Hanna has taken a villa at which she hosts a party to celebrate her native Balkan culture. Lehár achieves this first with a dance and chorus, and then with a supposed **folk-song about a Vilja**, or wood-spirit; the wistful, sentimental touch is another operetta fingerprint, and *Vilja* immediately became the take-away number from the show. The singer is **Renée Fleming**, and the director is **Bartlett Sher**. The scraps of foreign-sounding language are completely made up!

26. Lehár: *The Merry Widow*, Act II opening [9:26]

The older man congratulating Hanna at the very end is the Pontevedrian ambassador, **Baron Zeta (Sir Thomas Allen)**. He knows that his country is on the verge of bankruptcy, and so is eager to get Hanna to marry his countryman, **Danilo (Nathan Gunn)**. We see immediately that there is a spark between Danilo and Hanna, and they flirt a lot, but for some reason he refuses to say “I love you.” You can see this playing out in the duet that follows this opening number; I have only time for the second verse.

27. Lehár: *The Merry Widow*, Hanna/Danilo Act II duet, second verse [1:44]

Of course there are many other complications that I shan't even attempt to explain. It all results in the men getting together and—like **Sigmund Freud**—asking “Who can tell what the hell women are?” (the translation is a recent one, and rather more racy than original). Of all the numbers in the show, this one is probably the most indebted to **Offenbach**. The gay character is **Njegus**, Zeta's aide (**Carson Elrod**).

28. Lehár: *The Merry Widow*, Act II ensemble, “Who can tell what the hell?” [3:18]

At the stage, the relationship between Hanna and Danilo is comic rather than romantic. To bring in the sweep of romance, Lehár features a second couple, Camille de Rosilon (**Alek Shrader**) and Baron Zeta's much younger wife **Valencienne (Kelli O'Hara)**. Camille's tenor ardor melts her resistance and she lets him lead her into a secluded pavillion. As you listen, note that Lehár's writing is a lot richer than simple song and accompaniment: listen for all those instrumental lines intertwining in the orchestra.

29. Lehár: *The Merry Widow*, Camille's seduction of Valencienne [4:36]

I paused here, but intend to forge straight ahead, to give you a sense of the texture over a much longer stretch: dialogue, an elaborate act-finale, and then (in this Met production) a simply marvelous transition into the third act, which takes place at Maxim's. Baron Zeta suspects that his wife Valencienne is in the pavillion with Camille—which indeed she is. In order to protect her reputation, Hanna arranges a switcheroo in which it will be she who is discovered in the pavillion rather than Valencienne. Despite his pretended indifference, this makes Danilo jealous. The finale, which contains numerous different sections, is essentially the working-out of this situation of suspicion and uncertainty, until all decide to go off to spend the night at Maxim's. The choreographer is **Susan Stroman**.

30. Lehár: *The Merry Widow*, dialogue, Act II finale, and transition into Act III [18:29]

More Offenbach influence, obviously, in the can-can. The act brings Hanna and Danilo together once more. He still can't come out with it and say "I love you," but he at least comes close in the duet "Music's playing, hear it saying, 'I love you'." For the first time, Lehár backs off the comic tone in his treatment of this duet, in which the famous **Waltz** creeps in, enveloping the pair in a romantic shimmer. This is a love duet, but not an actual proposal; it has the same wistful quality of the *Vilja* song, so characteristic of Viennese operetta.

31. Lehár: *The Merry Widow*, Act III Hanna/Danilo duet [2:34]

So how does the operetta end? Well, a lot a rabbits get pulled rapidly out of the hat. Baron Zeta discovers that it really was his wife in the pavillion, and announces his intention to divorce her. Now functionally single, he proposes to Hanna (to keep her money in the country), but she tells him that according to her husband's will, her inheritance will pass from her if she marries. Hearing this, Danilo immediately declares that he loves her; apparently it was only the fear of being thought a money-grubber that held him back before. She accepts, but tells him that the reason the inheritance would pass from her is that it would be transferred to her husband—so Danilo gets both the widow *and* the money. Valencienne convinces Zeta of her innocence (in body if not in heart), and all make up.

32. Lehár: *The Merry Widow*, Act III finale and class title 3 [0:54]