

Class 2: Americans Old and New

A. Early Days

1. Class title 1 (Herbert, Friml, Romberg)

The three composers on this slide, Victor **Herbert**, Rudolf **Friml**, and Sigmund **Romberg**, all emigrated from Europe and wrote at least one Broadway work in this country that continued the European operetta tradition. They are my direct link to the first class; I'll feature them in the second hour. But of course there were musical shows playing in New York before they got here; in this first hour, we'll make a very rapid survey of a few of them.

2. Section title A (*The Black Crook*)

That is a poster for ***The Black Crook*** (1866), often credited as the first show to fit what we now think of as an original Broadway musical—though it was neither on Broadway nor entirely original; let me explain. *The Black Crook* was presented at a theater in SoHo called **Niblo's Garden**; it was not until the early 1900s that the theater district moved up to the still-undeveloped area around Times Square, seeking less expensive real estate. Built by **PT Barnum**, Niblo's could hold 3,000 people, so its run of 474 performances would have been very profitable. It is important as the first musical in Broadway history to make huge profits over a long run, due largely to its visual magnificence. It was the first **megamusical**.

2y. Niblo's Garden Theatre

Frankly, *The Black Crook* was mash-up of totally different ingredients. Though produced in America, it relied almost entirely on ideas, effects, and actual performers imported from Europe. The original author, an actor called **Charles M. Barras**, came up with a kind of Gothic thriller, largely cribbed from operas such as *Der Freischütz* and *Faust*. Meanwhile, the producers for another New York theater, the Academy of Music on 14th Street. They found a spectacular transformation effect in London, bought all its equipment, and had it shipped over to New York. But then the Academy of Music burned down, so the producers approached Niblo's Garden to see if they were interested. The manager, William Wheatley, realized that this might be a way to make Barras's drama work, especially if further dolled up with the import of a French ballet troupe. These turned out to be the hit of the show; ballet was still a novelty on the American stage, and by comparison with the standards of the time, these women wore next to nothing."

2z. More illustrations of *The Black Crook*

The only music from the show I could find online is the dance piece I played under the title video, plus one other song. It seems a total mismatch. Most of it was compiled from existing tunes by a man called **Thomas Baker**. Only a couple of the songs were original, including the one I'll play you now, a piece called "You naughty, naughty men." Put it together with one of the show posters, and the cognitive

dissonance is huge: “*I will never more deceive you, or of happiness bereave you, but I’ll die a maid to grieve you, oh you naughty, naughty men. You talk of love and sighing, say for us you’re nearly dying, all the while you know you’re trying to deceive, you naughty men.*” The singer is **Hilary Cole**.

3. “You naughty men,” inserted into *The Black Crook*

It is still unclear who wrote that song; the “**G. Bickwell**” on the music cover is almost certainly a pseudonym. I find two things about it striking: it could easily come from any light Broadway romance earlier than 1950 or so, and it is so completely out of tune with the stage spectacle. But that is something we will see again and again in earlier Broadway musicals: however grand or atmospheric the setting, the actual plot is often as not a light romance.

4. Section menu

Here are the shows I touch on in this section. We have just seen *The Black Crook* (1866). Most of its music was not original, but that of *Evangeline* (1874), composed by **Edward Rice** certainly was, making it a far better candidate for the first-ever American musical. After that, I look at *El Capitan* (1896) by **John Philip Sousa**, as close to an operetta as America produced, and *Little Johnny Jones* (1904), as an example of a work by the ubiquitous **George M. Cohan**. There were also a couple of all-Black shows in there that I’ll mention next week. Then two works from the postwar period: *No, No, Nannette* (1925) by **Vincent Youmans** and *Oh, Kay* (1927), as an example of a show by **George Gershwin** and his brother **Ira**. Were I an academic music theater historian, and taking the *Birth of Broadway* title of this course literally, I might take 3 sessions over these seven works, showing you faded photographs, sheet music, and press reviews. But I reckon you are mainly here for the music, and examples of that are very hard to come by. So this section is a mere 40 minutes long, and the examples come from wherever I can find them: community productions in Maine, Ohio, and Australia; James Cagney and Doris Day movies; a modern club singer, and the 1982 Tony Awards.

5. Edward Everett Rice

All my information about **Edward Everett Rice** (1847–1924) comes from Wikipedia. He was the son of a prosperous Massachusetts meat merchant, who arranged a private music tutor for his eight-year-old boy. This resulted in Edward being able to improvise fluently and play by ear, but (like **Irving Berlin**) he never learned to read music. Later on, his father offered to send him to Germany for more formal training, but the organist at his church advised against it, saying “the world needs songs, not sonatas.” And songs he gave them. His *Evangeline* (1874), a burlesque of the poem by **Longfellow**, is credited as the first true musical, as I said. He went on to write more than a dozen other shows and produce others. The plot of *Evangeline* is quite absurd, involving the abduction of an Acadian heiress, shipwreck on a savage African country, escape by balloon, and pursuit by an unscrupulous notary—and, oh yes, her pet dancing heifer. I have a semi-staged performance by a company in Maine. The performers may be amateurs, but the person who put together the video is entirely professional. I will play a couple of verses from each of two numbers: a bathing sextet for women, and a song of the sea for men.

6. Rice: *Evangeline*, bathing sextet
7. Rice: *Evangeline*, the song of Sammy
8. John Philip Sousa

I don't imagine you need me to say much about **John Philip Sousa** (1854–1932). He was an army bandmaster, and his marches have become an integral part of American life. But he also wrote over a dozen operettas, including *El Capitan* (1896). They are actually closer to Gilbert and Sullivan than to Viennese operetta, and indeed Sousa often included music by Sullivan alongside his own works in the concerts he conducted. The libretto by Charles Klein imagines a highly-fictionalized 16th-century Peru. The mild-mannered Viceroy, fearful of assassination by the rebels, disguises himself as the fearsome guerilla leader “El Capitan,” knowing well that the real El Capitan has died. In this role, he leads the rebels in circles until they drop with exhaustion. There are amorous complications too, but all ends happily. There is a complete production by the Ohio Light Opera Company is on YouTube. It is not professional quality, but it at least enables me to play a choral number which shows Sousa very much in his march vein, and the Viceroy's first appearance as El Capitan.

9. Sousa: *El Capitan*, rebel chorus
10. Sousa: *El Capitan*, “Behold El Capitan”
- ~~11. Will Marion Cook~~

Despite what you might guess from the photograph, **Will Marion Cook** (1869–1944) was African American on both sides. After graduating from Oberlin, he studied for a while with **Antonin Dvorak** in New York, then attended the conservatory in Berlin for several years. He is a pivotal figure in Broadway history as the composer of the first all-Black musicals. His *Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898) had words by **Paul Laurence Dunbar**, later associated with the Harlem Renaissance; it was produced by Edward Rice (the composer of *Evangeline*). But it was a shorter piece played in a roof garden, so the accolade for first full-length musical comedy written and performed by Blacks in a major theater goes to his next work, *In Dahomey* (1903). I will be doing more on African-American music in the next class, so I will content myself now with a single song from this, “Brown Skin Baby Mine,” sung by a modern performer, **Austin Rivers**, in some kind of club setting.

- ~~12. Cook: *In Dahomey*, “Brown Skin Baby Mine”~~
13. George M. Cohan

I called **George Michael Cohan** (1878–1942) “ubiquitous.” And with reason. Beginning as a child, he was appearing with his sister and parents in a vaudeville act called “The Four Cohans.” He wrote, composed, and appeared in his first Broadway show, *Little Johnny Jones*, in 1904, and went on to write several dozen more shows and around 300 songs. He continued to appear onstage and in films until shortly before his death. Not for nothing was he known as “The Man Who Owned Broadway.” I am going to play the most famous song from *Little Johnny Jones*, “Give my regards to Broadway.” Jones, the protagonist, is an American jockey who has gone over to England to ride in the Derby. But he does not win, and rumors are spread that he deliberately threw the race. So he stays over there to clear his name while his friends return home; the song is his farewell as they are setting off on their ship. I am using a clip from the 1942 Cohan biopic *Yankee Doodle Dandy* with **James Cagney**, because it shows the scene on a stage.

14. Cohan: *Little Johnny Jones*, “Give my regards to Broadway”

15. Vincent Youmans

Moving now to the interwar years, the big hit of 1925 was *No, No, Nannette* with text by Irving Caesar (1895–1996) and music by **Vincent Youmans** (1898–1946). *Nannette* is the ward of a wealthy couple who want to bring her up as a lady in society, but she gets tired of always hearing “No, no, Nannette,” and wants to go her own way. Here is the title number performed on a stage by Doris Day in the 1950 movie *Tea for Two*—a film that recycles most of the numbers from the original, though with an entirely different story.

16. Youmans: *No, No, Nannette*, title number

The most famous song in the show, though, is “Tea for Two,” which has become a standard. For that, I’m going with an actual stage performance by a group in Ballarat, Australia. Yes, they are amateurs, but this is a genuine stage production and probably closer in recreating the feel of the original than some movie or glamorous revival. *Nannette* is with her boyfriend looking at a site where they might build a house if they ever get married. The number has a 3-minute dance sequence, which I have cut for time,

17. Youmans: *No, No, Nannette*, “Tea for Two”

18. George and Ira Gershwin

George Gershwin (1898–1937) and his elder brother **Ira** (1896–1983) were the powerhouse pair on Broadway in the interwar years. George also wrote music for the concert stage and opera house, as we shall see in a later class, and Ira supplied his witty lyrics for several other composers, but together they were a knockout. The titles shown here are two of the earliest of over a dozen Broadway collaborations. The plots are more or less frivolous, and serve as little more than connective tissue for the songs, many of which became Tin Pan Alley standards, such as “Someone to watch over me,” the hit of *Oh, Kay!* (1926). I have it sung by **Leslie Uggams** at the Tony Awards for the 1982 revival, followed by two other numbers that, though necessarily simple in their staging, probably still give a good sense of the range of the show.

19. Gershwin: *Oh, Kay!*, medley at the 1982 Tonys

20. Class title 2 (modification of slide #4)

B. Three Immigrants

21. Section title B (three immigrants)

The dates on that last video were those in which each person came to this country: **Victor Herbert** (1859–1924) from Britain via Germany in 1886, **Rudolf Friml** (1879–1972) from Czechoslovakia in 1906, and **Sigmund Romberg** (1887–1951) from Hungary in 1909. All three became major Broadway composers, but Herbert’s case was rather different from the others; let me explain by turning to a rather different medium.

22. Herbert: *Cello Concerto #2* (1894), cello opening (Amanda Forsyth)

Herbert, who was born in Britain (perhaps Dublin, though accounts vary), lived with his mother in Germany from his early teens onwards. He trained as a cellist and soon became a well-known virtuoso. His opera-soprano wife was engaged by the Met in 1886, and he became its principal cellist. But he found time for conducting and composing, and besides writing the concerto you have just heard plus many other classical pieces, ended up by writing 30 operettas. The music in the background to my title video is the “March of the Toy Soldiers” from one of the earliest of them, *Babes in Toyland* (1903), which has a fantasy plot. But since I am concentrating on works in the European operetta tradition, let me pass on to the best-known of them, *Naughty Marietta* (1910).

23. Herbert: *Naughty Marietta*, 1935 film poster

I have directed it myself, but have no video of that or any other usable stage production. Instead, I shall show you the end of the celebrated 1935 film with **Jeanette MacDonald** and **Nelson Eddy**, but before that (because it has more of the feel of the stage) a clip from a 1955 television production with the Metropolitan Opera star **Patrice Munsel**. The operetta is set in America, but because it is eighteenth-century New Orleans, and the plot concerns a foreign princess disguised as a street singer (don’t ask), it is every bit as fanciful as Lehár’s fictional Pontevedro. I’ll play snatches of its two most famous numbers: one is a Neapolitan street song, showing Marietta’s peasant persona—and also the need for a real coloratura singer—the other is a song of yearning, with the simply dreadful words “Sweet mystery of life, at last I’ve found thee!”, which appears in earlier scenes as an offstage mystery. In the final scene, Marietta is being feted as the princess she is; when she reveals herself by singing the song, and the tenor joins in with the refrain, the romantic plot comes to its appropriate conclusion.

24. Herbert: *Naughty Marietta*, Italian street song (Patrice Munsel)

25. Herbert: *Naughty Marietta*, final scene (1935 film)

26. Rudolf Friml

Rudolf Friml (1879–1972), like Will Marion Cook, studied with Anton Dvorak, but in Prague not New York. He was expelled for playing without permission, but nothing daunted, he came to this country as a piano virtuoso. Like Victor Herbert he worked at the Met, and like him he wrote a concerto for his instrument, which he played at Carnegie Hall, no less. His big break on Broadway came when Herbert quarrelled with the soprano he was writing an operetta for—*The Firefly* (1912); it was to be his first

theatrical success. Others followed, including *Rose-Marie* (1924), a romance between a Canadian mountie and a French Canadian girl, **Rose-Marie**. One day they hear an Indian singing in the mountains, and it becomes the beginning of a love duet; I would be remiss not to play a short snatch of it; the singers are **Ann Blyth** and **Fernando Lamas** in the 1954 film. The lyrics are by **Oscar Hammerstein**.

27. Friml: *Rose-Marie*, Indian love call

28. Posters for *The Vagabond King*

However, since I am specifically tracking the influence of European operetta on the Broadway musical, I want to concentrate on Friml's hit of the following year (1925), *The Vagabond King*. Although nominally historical, about the late medieval French poet **François Villon** (1431–63), it is so fictionalized as to be as romanticized as anything by Herbert or Lehár. Villon, who lives a life of the streets, is granted permission to become King for a Day, and in that capacity leads a band of his fellow vagabonds to defeat the enemies of France. As part of the bargain, he is supposed to be hanged when the day is done, but he has fallen in love with a noblewoman, **Katherine de Vaucelles**, and with her intercession wins both his life and the bride. Go figure. But Friml's music is worth any absurdity in the plot. Here are three samples, all taken from the 1954 movie with **Kathryn Grayson** and **Oreste Kirkop**; the performer we see first is **Rita Moreno**. The lyrics are by **Otto Harbach**. The story, incidentally, was developed by **Rodgers and Hart**, but they were considered too unseasoned, so the idea was offered to Friml instead.

29. Friml: *The Vagabond King*, “Vive la you”

30. Friml: *The Vagabond King*, “Only a rose”

31. Friml: *The Vagabond King*, March of the Vagabonds

32. Sigmund Romberg

The story of **Sigmund Romberg** (1887–1951) is very similar to that of Rudolf Friml. Both emigrated from Eastern Europe, both wrote their first musical-theater works in this country, and both achieved a huge success. Romberg came over at the age of 18, and soon found employment playing the piano in cafés. His songs came to the attention of the theatrical impresarios the Shubert Brothers, who had him write numbers for their Broadway revues. He also became involved in adapting various Viennese operettas for the American market, so he got into the business by working in an idiom he was already familiar with.

33. Posters for *The Student Prince*

The work of Romberg's with the greatest feel of European operetta is *The Student Prince* (1924). Again we have a young royal from some imaginary kingdom, **Prince Karl Franz**. He is sent to Heidelberg to complete his education; my first excerpt is the famous **drinking song** (this during American Prohibition!), his initiation into the Student Corps. You will see that he has fallen in love with **Kathie**, the daughter of the landlord of the nearest *Bierstube*. Unlike the traditional operetta happy endings, though, Karl Franz does not marry his sweetheart, but goes home on his father's death, marries the Princess intended for him, and becomes King. In the last act, Karl Franz returns to Heidelberg, but his wife (who has come to love him) gets there first and persuades Kathie to pretend that she has already married another man—but not before Karl Franz sings the **Serenade** under her window that is the other hit number of the show. Both my excerpts come from films. The first from the 1954 film, originally scheduled to be made

with **Mario Lanza**, who recorded the sound-track, but physically he was replaced by the British actor **Edmund Purdom**, who lip-synchs to Lanza's recording. The second comes from 1954 biopic on Romberg from the same year, *Deep in my Heart*; this at least shows most of its numbers on the stage; the singer is a tenor I had never heard of, **William Olvis**.

34. Romberg: *The Student Prince* (film 1954): drinking song

35. Romberg: *The Student Prince* (film *Deep in my Heart*): Serenade

I'll end with another section from *Deep in My Heart*, a Charleston number called "It." Odd though it may seem, it was originally slotted into another of Romberg's fantasy musicals, *The Desert Song* (1926), but he resued it later in a revue called *Artists and Models*. I'm playing it because the dancing performance by **Ann Miller** is simply stunning, and also to show that Romberg did not confine himself to escapist fantasy in other times and places, but could also reflect the contemporary party scene of the Twenties. Leaving Heidelberg behind, *We're in America now*.

36. Romberg: "It" (from *Deep in my Heart*), and class title 3