

The Birth of Broadway



2. Americans Old & New

February 25, 2025

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THE MOST SIGNIFICANT IMPACT OF OPERETTA ON BROADWAY occurred early in the twentieth century with the arrival of composers who had been raised and trained in Europe, but wrote their first stage works in America. Three such composers—Victor Herbert, Rudolf Friml, and Sigmund Romberg—will fill our second hour.

But meantime, there was already a Broadway over here—or rather a number of musical shows playing downtown, even before the theaters moved up to the 42nd Street area to create the Broadway we know today. Our first hour offers a rapid survey of some of these, necessarily brief because none of the shows were filmed at the time and we have to make do with reconstructions. But they should be enough to show something of the range of popular musical work created by Americans for Americans in America. *rb.*

A. Early Days

What are the most significant landmarks in the early history of Broadway? *The Black Crook* (1866), which combined music old and new with spectacular stage effects? Or *Evangeline* (1874), the first full-length show all by the same composer? Or Sousa's *El Capitan* (1896), a light-hearted American answer to European operetta? Or *Clorindy* (1898) and *In Dahomey* (1904), the first shows written and performed by African Americans? Or the first works of Broadway giants George M. Cohan or the Gershwin brothers? We will look at these, using a combination of concert performances, biopics, feature films, and modern reconstructions.

Bickwell: "You naughty, naughty men" from *The Black Crook* (1866)
(Hilary Cole in concert, 2023)

Rice: *Evangeline* (1874), Bathing Sextet and the Song of Sammy
(2016 reconstruction by Longfellow Chorus, Maine)

Sousa: *El Capitan* (1896), rebel chorus and entrance of El Capitan (Ohio Light Opera, 2010)

Cook: *In Dahomey* (1904), “Brown skin baby mine” (Austin Rivers in concert, 2023)

Cohan: *Little Johnny Jones* (1904), “Give my regards to Broadway” (James Cagney in 1942 biopic, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*)

Youmans: *No, No, Nannette* (1925), title song (Doris Day in the 1950 movie *Tea for Two*)

Youmans: *No, No, Nannette* (1925), “Tea for Two” (Ballarat Lyric Theatre, 1990)

Gershwin: *Oh, Kay!* (1926), medley at the 1982 Tony Awards (Leslie Uggams and company)

Friml: *The Vagabond King* (1925), three excerpts (Rita Moreno, Kathryn Grayson, Oreste Kirkop; film 1954)

Romberg: *The Student Prince* (1924): drinking song (Mario Lanza / Edmund Purdom, from 1954 film)

Romberg: *The Student Prince* (1924): Serenade (William Olvis, from film *Deep in my Heart*, 1954)

Romberg: “It” (Ann Miller, from *Deep in my Heart*, 1954)

Irving **Caesar** (1895–1996, *American lyricist*), George M[ichael] **Cohan** (1878–1942, *American composer*), Will Marion **Cook** (1869–1944, *American composer*), Rudolf **Friml** (1879–1972, *Czech-American composer*), George **Gershwin** (1898–1937, *American composer*), Ira **Gershwin** (1896–1983, *American lyricist*), Victor **Herbert** (1859–1924, *British-American composer*), Edward Everett **Rice** (1847–1924, *American composer*), Sigmund **Romberg** (1887–1951, *Hungarian-American composer*), John Philip **Sousa** (1854–1932, *American composer*), Vincent **Youmans** (1898–1946, *American composer*)

B. Three Immigrants

The immigrants of our title are **Victor Herbert**, who came over from Britain by way of Germany in 1885, **Rudolf Friml** who came from Czechoslovakia in 1906, and **Sigmund Romberg** from Hungary in 1909. Between them, they more or less ruled Broadway on either side of the First World War. Herbert was the only one with compositions to his credit back in Europe. Friml, like him, began his career as a classical musician and fell into musical theater more or less by accident. Romberg, however, worked a kind of Broadway apprenticeship over here, writing songs for revues and adapting European operettas before attempting a work of his own. All three composers were prolific, and there is much we could choose, but (given the theme of this course) we are focusing on works that maintain the operetta tradition.

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

Herbert: *Naughty Marietta* (1910), Italian Street Song (Patrice Munsel, television performance , 1955)

Herbert: *Naughty Marietta* (1910), “Ah sweet mystery of life!” (Jeanette MacDonald, Nelson Eddy, film , 1935)

Friml: *Rose-Marie* (1924), Indian Love Call (Ann Blyth, Fernando Lamas; film 1954)

The course website is www.brunyate.com/BirthBroadway
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