

Comedy in Song



Carnegie, Rockville

Wednesday Mornings, Fall 2025

Comedy in Song

Audiences first flocked to Broadway to laugh; the word "musicals" is short for "musical comedies." Though laughter is no longer a requirement in musicals today, the tradition goes back at least to the comic operas of Mozart and Rossini or the satires of Gilbert and Sullivan. And you don't even need a theater; the songbook is packed with numbers that are funny in their own right. Comedy can take the form of outrageous farces that make you laugh out loud, but it can also be quite subtle, evoking the smile of wry recognition rather than the belly laugh. We will try to break this down, looking at comedy of all kinds over a wide range of media; the only requirement is that it should involve singers delivering well-crafted words, preferably in a staged context. *Roger Brunyate.*



1. The Comic Vision (September 17)

An interactive overview of the entire course and the different kinds of comedy to be discussed in it, featuring clips from many different sources to provoke discussion.

2. CanCan/Cachucha (September 24)

Two works by the grandfather of musical comedy, Jacques Offenbach: his classical spoof *Orpheus in the Underworld* (ending in the famous can-can), and *La Périchole*—frustrated lust in colonial Peru.



3. Opera Buffa (October 1)

Rossini's last comic opera, *Le Comte Ory*, about a womanizing Count who tries to seduce a devout Countess (husband off on the Crusades) by disguising himself first as a hermit and then as a nun.

4. A Hard-Knock Life (October 8)

Though based on the famous comic strip, Charles Strouse's *Annie* is an original story that takes us from Hell's Kitchen to the White House in an infectious mixture of melodrama and farce.



5. A Family Show (October 15)

A one-act classic played complete. Puccini's *Gianni Schicci* tells of a quarrelsome family in 1300s Florence who get a trickster to impersonate a dying relative so they can inherit his wealth.

6. Satire on Stage (October 22)

Though ostensibly set in Japan, Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* is really a satire on *English* politics. We shall watch a classic production by Jonathan Miller that was one of the first to return it to Britain.



7. Satire in Song (October 29)

In the 1960s, mathematics professor Tom Lehrer made a second career performing satirical songs. Using him as a pivot, we look at several such performers, both earlier and in the present day.

8. When Farce Gets Real (November 5)

Back now to *Così fan tutte*, the last collaboration between Mozart and da Ponte. Its mechanism is pure farce, but it touches on truths about sex and desire that hurt because the characters are human.



9. Local Color (November 12)

Smetana's *Bartered Bride* is one of many Eastern European operas in the later 1800s that revel in regional color. Though a comedy bordering on farce, it has warm romance at its heart.

10. The Jellicle Ball (November 19)

Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats* was originally a plotless setting of children's verse by TS Eliot. With a story added by director Trevor Nunn, it made animal fantasy into mega-musical material.



11. Magical Morality Tale (December 3)

Animal fantasy also plays a part in Ravel's earlier opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges* (the enchanted child). This one-of-a kind work is also in a single act that enables us to watch it complete in class.

12. The Witch in the Woods (December 10)

Sondheim combines at least four Grimm fairy tales into this mash-up that takes its characters into the woods, introduces a Witch, and stands back for some surprising twists.



For more detail, color illustrations, artist bios, and suggestions for further reading, see the class website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/ComedySong/>

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Probable featured productions: *Così fan Tutte* (Mozart 1990), Salzburg 2009 and/or Covent Garden 2016; *Le Comte Ory* (Rossini 1828), Metropolitan 2011; *Orpheus in the Underworld* (Offenbach 1858), Salzburg 2019; *La Périchole* (Offenbach 1868), Paris 2022; *The Mikado* (Gilbert & Sullivan 1885), English National Opera 2016; *The Bartered Bride* (Smetana 1864), Vienna 1982 and/or Garsington 2019; *Gianni Schicchi* (Puccini, 1918), Glyndebourne 2004; *L'enfant et les sortilèges* (Ravel 1925), Glyndebourne 2012; *Annie* (Strouse 1977), NBC 2021; *Cats* (Lloyd Webber 1982), London 1998; *Into the Woods* (Sondheim 1986), Broadway 1999.