

Music on the Stage



9. Immigrant Broadway

November 13, 2024

9. Immigrant Broadway

FIVE OF THE SIX NAMES LISTED ON THE POSTER ON THE COVER—Ziegfeld, Ferber, Hammerstein, Kern, and Lee—are the children of immigrants to the United States; the sixth, designer Joseph Urban, emigrated after establishing himself as an architect in Europe. While *Show Boat* (1927) is unusual in being the first musical that is driven by a serious plot rather than romantic fantasy, it is not at all unusual as to the European background of its creators.

What features of European operetta made it such a hit in turn-of-the-century America? When American composers sought to emulate it, what changed? Did it matter whether such composers had come over as children like Irving Berlin, or mid-career like Kurt Weill? And although Broadway was largely sustained by affluent patrons, how often did the subjects of its shows reflect the immigrant experience? The class is roughly chronological, 1907–56. *rb.*

A. The Shadow of Europe

The big hit on Broadway in 1907 was the operetta *The Merry Widow* by Franz Lehár, who spent his entire career in Europe; it succeeded by a combination of French energy and Viennese nostalgia. We see these elements playing out in the work of composers such as Victor Herbert and Sigmund Romberg who wrote their first operettas in this country.

Bernstein: *Candide* (1956–74), "Easily assimilated" (Patti LuPone)

Lehár: *The Merry Widow* (1905), "We're the ladies of the chorus" (Kelli O'Hara, Met 2014)

Lehár: *The Merry Widow* (1905), "Vilja" (Renée Fleming, Met 2014)

Herbert: *Naughty Marietta* (1910): Italian street song and final duet (film 1926), Jeannette MacDonald, Nelson Eddy

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

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

B. The American Scene

Broadway between the wars was not all escapist fantasy; it could embrace the energy of the twenties and feature contemporary dances. More importantly, it could occasionally address serious social concerns such as alcoholism and race.

Romberg: "It" (from *Deep in my Heart*, 1954), Ann-Margaret

Kern: *Show Boat* (1920), "I might fall back on you" (Marge & Gower Champion)

Kern: *Show Boat*, "Ol' Man River" (Morris Robinson, SF Opera 2014)

Kern: *Show Boat*, "Can't help lovin'" (Patricia Racette, as above)

Kern: *Show Boat*, Magnolia's audition (Heidi Stober, as above)

Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess* (1935), "Summertime" (Golda Schultz, Met 2020)

C. A Kid at Ellis Island

Israel Beilin fled Russia with his parents at the age of five. He grew up to be the most iconic of American composers as Irving Berlin. His biggest Broadway success, *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), might seem a throwback to earlier styles—but was it?

Berlin: "God Bless America" (Ed Sullivan Show, 1968)

Berlin: "Alexander's Ragtime Band," 1911 (Carling Family, inst.)

Berlin: *Yip, Yap, Yahank!* (1917), "We're off to France"

Berlin: *This is the Army* (1943), title song (film 1943)

Berlin: *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), "There's no business like show business" (film 1950, Betty Hutton)

Berlin: *Annie Get Your Gun*, "Anything you can do" (w/Howard Keel)

D. Man Without a Country

Kurt Weill is unique among the composers discussed here in having produced a significant body of work in Europe before emigrating. He found success in America also, though it was mostly of a different kind. We propose the idea that Weill felt rootless *wherever* he was, and that his most enduring contribution is as the Laureate of Loss.

Weill: *Happy End* (1929), "Surabaya Johnny" (Angel Blue)

Weill: *Mahagonny* (1927/30), "Moon of Alabama" (Nadja Mchantaf)

Weill: *Marie Galante* (1934), Rome Opera 2007, trailer

Weill/Fernay: "Youkali" (film 2020, Barbara Hannigan, Simon Rattle)

Weill: *Street Scene* (1946), opening (Madrid 2018)

E. Sharks and Jets

West Side Story, the iconic tragedy created by second-generation immigrants in 1956, was unique in addressing the street life of two competing immigrant groups, Italians and Puerto Ricans. But Bernstein's music and Robbins' dance gives it an infectiously upbeat mood.

Bernstein: *West Side Story* (1956), "America" (2021 film)

Irving **Berlin** (1888–1989, *American composer and lyricist*), Leonard **Bernstein** (1918–90, *American conductor and composer*), Bertolt **Brecht** (1898–1956, *German playwright*), Rudolf **Friml** (1879–1972, *Czech-American composer*), George **Gershwin** (1898–1937, *American composer*), Oscar **Hammerstein II** (1895–1960, *American lyricist*), Victor **Herbert** (1859–1924, *British-American composer*), Jerome **Kern** (1885–1945, *American composer*), Franz **Lehár** (1870–1948, *Austro-Hungarian composer*), Jacques **Offenbach** (1819–80, *French composer*), Jerome **Robbins** (1919–98, *American choreographer*), Sigmund **Romberg** (1887–1951, *Hungarian-American composer*), Stephen **Sondheim** (1930–2021, *American composer and lyricist*), Kurt **Weill** (1900–50, *German-American composer*)

The course website is www.brunyate.com/MusicStage
I will always respond to mail at rogerbrunyate@gmail.com