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Geoffrey Block

University of Puget Sound, block@pugetsound.edu

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The Broadway Canon from Show Boat to West Side Story and the European Operatic Ideal

Author(s): Geoffrey Block

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The Broadway Canon from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story* and the European Operatic Ideal

GEOFFREY BLOCK

The Broadway musical from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story* remains in the 1990s a familiar and living cultural artifact. Revivals of perennial favorites or reworked versions of lesser-known shows from this period appear almost without fail each year on Broadway, regional and community theaters of all types present these same musicals season after season, the summer stock of pre-1960s musicals remains high, and many college or high school experiences would remain incomplete without a spring production of *Oklahoma!* or *Kiss Me, Kate*. Among the approximately three hundred "book" musicals that opened on Broadway between *Show Boat* in 1927 and *West Side Story* in 1957 about a dozen not only enjoyed long runs and critical acclaim in their time, but have long since formed a securely entrenched place in the repertoire and earned growing stature, even in musicological circles. Who can explain it? Who can tell you why?

One explanation is that the criteria for Broadway canonization are strikingly similar to those established for the European musical canon. Just as Beethovenian ideals of thematic unity and organicism became increasingly applied to dramatic works (culminating in Wagner's music dramas), Broadway musicals after Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943) would be evaluated on how convincingly they realized a new "ideal type," the integrated musical.

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Integrated Broadway musicals share with their European operatic counterparts the ideal of a musical drama in which the various parts—song, story, and movement—form an interdependent and homogeneous whole. With the notable exceptions of *Show Boat* and *Porgy and Bess* (1935) the pre-Rodgers and Hammerstein musical offers striking parallels with Baroque operas, where composers and librettists serve larger-than-life stars who arrest the action with their show-stopping arias. After *Oklahoma!*, canonic musicals frequently aspire to and often approach Joseph Kerman's dramatic standard of European operatic excellence and use music to define character, generate action, and establish atmosphere.¹

Broadway and the Canonic Mainstream in Europe and America

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For most of the music-consuming public the musical equivalent to what nineteenth-century literary critic Matthew Arnold considered the "best that has been thought and written," (i.e., the canon) begins with Bach and Handel in the eighteenth century and continues through Schoenberg and Stravinsky in the twentieth. Occupying the center of the musical canon are several symphonies and string quartets of Haydn, the later keyboard concertos and operas of Mozart, nearly the entire instrumental output of Beethoven, Schubert's songs, the piano works of Chopin, the middle and late operas of Verdi and Wagner, a large dose of Brahms, the piano and orchestral music of Debussy, the early ballets of Stravinsky, Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, Berg's *Wozzeck*, and perhaps another several hundred works by these and other composers. Significantly, no American composer has achieved unequivocal canonic stature, although several writers have argued persuasively that Ives belongs both in the European mainstream and in the canon.² The symphonies of Roy Harris and Walter Piston are too conservative, the music of Henry Cowell, John Cage, and Harry Partch too avant-garde, the minimalist operas of Philip Glass and John Adams too recent. Although most American music is excluded from the canon, there appears to be room in the museum for Copland's *Rodeo*, *Appalachian Spring*, *Billy the Kid*, and *Lincoln Portrait*, Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, and Ives's *The Unanswered*

¹ Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

² See Henry Cowell and Sidney Cowell, *Charles Ives and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955; 2nd edition enlarged and reprinted 1969; reprinted by Da Capo Press, 1983), and J. Peter Burkholder, *Charles Ives: The Ideas Behind the Music* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

Question. Among works created by Broadway composers George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, *Concerto in F*, *An American in Paris*, and *Porgy and Bess* (at least the songs), and Leonard Bernstein's *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story* and the overture to *Candide* have arguably earned a place in the museum, although many critics have considered these works too accessible to be worthy of canonization.

The works that first appeared on Broadway, like nearly all of their classical American counterparts, for the most part inhabit territory outside the Eurocentric canon. The Broadway terrain itself is quite large, despite its geographic confinement, and the shows that have been staged on this island-within-an-island exhibit a staggering range of musical typology. At one end of the vast Broadway spectrum are works that are sung nearly throughout, works like *Porgy and Bess*, *The Most Happy Fella*, and *Sweeney Todd*. These operas in Broadway clothing together with numerous operettas deemed suitable for operatically trained voices such as *Show Boat*, *Carousel*, *Street Scene*, or *A Little Night Music* (to name only a few), eventually found a second and perhaps a permanent new home on the operatic range. Occupying the other end of the Broadway continuum are revues which generally feature non-singing actors and emphasize spectacle over integration of music and drama. As early as the 1890s three recognizable, if somewhat blurry, sub-genres of the American musical had emerged: operettas, musical comedies, and revues. Operas then as now constituted a special sub-genre whose historical and artistic importance far exceeded their representation.

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While revues might possess a unifying theme, they are usually without a plot or a book, and with few exceptions are characterized by a somewhat loose collection of skits, dances, and songs, often composed by a plethora of writers and composers. What normally survives from Broadway's revues are its songs and the memory of its stars, although Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz's justly-acclaimed and nearly canonic *The Band Wagon* of (1931), Harold Rome's (among others) *Pins and Needles* (1937), and Irving Berlin's *This Is the Army* (1942) demonstrate that the absence of a book does not inevitably detract from a unity of theme and style, nor do they preclude the creation of a first-rate show.

In contrast to revues, musical comedies and operettas tell stories and provide greater potential for music to aid an integrated dramatic narrative. Musical comedies like *Anything Goes*, *Pal Joey*, and *Guys and Dolls* normally utilize contemporary urban settings with matching vernacular dialogue and music, the latter often incorporating jazz. Before *Show Boat* and for a long time thereafter operettas were generally set in exotic locations filled with people most audiences were not likely

to meet in everyday life singing waltzes and other nineteenth-century European genres. First in *Show Boat* and later in the collaborative work of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II (the latter not coincidentally also *Show Boat's* lyricist and librettist) early Americana—New England in the 1870s depicted in *Carousel* and Oklahoma Territory at the turn of the last century—began to replace fictitious European places as suitable locales. These new operettas of the 1940s introduced appropriate regional dialects and a musical vernacular that somehow sounded American, although unlike their musical comedy predecessors of the 1920s and 1930s, not necessarily or even usually based on jazz.

Sharing the fate of Rachmaninoff, who has known popular adulation for a century but who, until lately, was rarely seriously accepted or studied by critics or scholars, many musicals, canonic musicals included, have enjoyed unwavering popularity and relatively little critical respect or scholarly attention. In standard surveys of twentieth-century music, Gershwin is given begrudging credit for bridging the gap between jazz and classical music, but *Porgy and Bess* is barely mentioned, Kurt Weill's earlier German works, *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, are given due respect while his American musicals are ignored, and Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* frequently merits a paragraph or two as an example of a political musical theater work or "Labor Musical," rather than as a work for art's sake.³

A few Broadway musicals have begun to receive the kind of serious scholarly study that accompanies canonic status. In recent years the musicological community read the first article in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* devoted to a work—*Porgy and Bess*—that came into the world through Broadway, and this essay was preceded by other important critical, analytical, and manuscript studies of this opera-musical hybrid.⁴ In recent years *The Musical Quarterly* has

³ See for example William W. Austin, *Music in the 20th Century: From Debussy through Stravinsky* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), and Glenn Watkins, *Soundings: Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1988).

⁴ Charles Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* XL (1987), 495–532. See also Richard Crawford, "It Ain't Necessarily Soul: Gershwin's 'Porgy and Bess' as a Symbol," *Yearbook for Inter-American Musical Research* VIII (1972), 17–38 and "Gershwin's Reputation: A Note on *Porgy and Bess*," *The Musical Quarterly* LXV (1979), 257–64; Wayne Shirley, *Porgy and Bess*, "Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress XXXI (1974), 97–107 and "Reconciliation on Catfish Row: Bess, Serena, and the Short Score of *Porgy and Bess*," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress XXXVIII* (1981), 144–65; and Lawrence Starr, "Toward a Re-evaluation of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*," *American Music* II, no. 2 (Summer 1984),

published manuscript studies of *The Most Happy Fella* and *The Cradle Will Rock*, and scholarly editions of landmark musicals are included in the projected series *Music in the United States* under the combined sponsorship of the AMS and the National Endowment for the Humanities.⁵ Recordings and productions that utilize manuscript and other archival materials, often starring opera celebrities, have rapidly and successfully entered the commercial marketplace.

Despite this activity, the Broadway musical remains not only outside the broader classical (and European) canon, but with few exceptions the genre itself remains outside the mainstream of American music history. Among the works that first appeared on Broadway, *Porgy and Bess* and *The Cradle Will Rock* (again) are discussed in the major surveys of American music by Gilbert Chase, Charles Hamm, H. Wiley Hitchcock, Daniel Kingman, and Wilfrid Mellers.⁶ Both Hamm and Hitchcock, however, devote far more attention to the great songwriters of the 1920s and 1930s and their songs than to their shows, and Chase ignores both. Kingman offers an overview of "Popular Musical Theater from the Jacksonian Era to the Present" that includes paragraph-length descriptions of several classic musicals from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story*.

Although the Broadway musical remains on the periphery of the European and the American classical canon—with a few significant exceptions such as the atypical *Porgy and Bess* and *The Cradle Will Rock*—it might be argued that *within* the genre a canon has developed or is in the process of being formed. At the heart of this canon dwells a small group of musicals appearing between *Show Boat* and *West Side Story* which have enjoyed long runs (at least for their time), are regularly revived, and favorably regarded by critics and historians as well as theater-goers.

The territory inhabited by this Broadway canon is a small musical museum—or a new wing of an established museum—where admit-

25–37 and "Gershwin's 'Bess, You Is My Woman Now': The Sophistication and Subtlety of a Great Tune," *The Musical Quarterly* LXX (1986), 429–48.

⁵ Geoffrey Block, "Frank Loesser's Sketchbooks for *The Most Happy Fella*," *The Musical Quarterly* LXXIII (1989), 60–78, and Carol J. Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* and Mass-Song Style of the 1930s," *The Musical Quarterly* LXXIII (1989), 445–75.

⁶ Gilbert Chase, *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1955; third edition, 1987); Charles Hamm, *Music in the New World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983); H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969; third edition, 1988); Daniel Kingman, *American Music: A Panorama* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979; rev., 1990); and Wilfrid Mellers, *Music in a New Found Land: Themes and Developments in the History of American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964; rev. 1987). Mellers also discusses *West Side Story* and Blitzstein's *Regina* at some length.

tance is earned through a combination of popularity and critical acclaim. Canonic musicals from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story* are analogous at least in this respect to Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, a work of universal popular appeal and endless fascination to musicologists, theorists, cultural historians, and lay public alike. Although first-run success does not automatically ensure a place in the permanent canon, it is striking that most of the musicals in Table 1, "The Thirty Longest Running Musical on Broadway from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story*," have experienced regular revivals on Broadway and in regional and various types of community theaters. The correlation between initial popularity and eventual canonization is indeed extraordinary: the five longest-running musicals in Table 1 (The Top Thirty) and no less than seven of the longest-running twelve all reappear in Table 2, The Canonic Twelve. Among this Canonic Twelve only *Porgy and Bess* and *Pal Joey*—both from an era that produced no book musicals that ran as long as 500 performances—fail to register in the Top Thirty, and even these musicals can boast respectable first runs for their genre and time.⁷

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Successful revivals provide at least one form of evidence that a musical's popularity transcends its time, especially when both critics and audiences are prone to change their criteria for judgment from decade to decade. The fate of George and Ira Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) illustrates how important it is to the canonic status of a musical that it make its place in the repertoire. This classic political satire achieved unprecedented distinction as the first musical book considered artistically (and commercially) worthy of publication. At 441 performances *Of Thee I Sing* also ranks as the longest-running book musical of the 1930s. Nevertheless, it has fared poorly in revival. Certainly *Of Thee I Sing* is a work that continues to merit our attention and respect, but until it establishes a place in the repertoire it will not gain admittance into the Broadway canon.

Several other outstanding musicals between 1927 and 1957, including Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Allegro* (1947), Weill and Alan Jay Lerner's *Love Life* (1948), and Jerome Moross and John La-touche's *The Golden Apple* (1954) have all acquired a small but loyal following, some positive critical attention, and occasional revivals, but like *Of Thee I Sing* are excluded from the Broadway canon. While it is a mistake to adhere rigidly to a formula that equates popular success and revivals with artistic value any more than one would argue that

⁷ If the Top Thirty were extended to a Top Thirty-Five, the 1952 revival of *Pal Joey* (542 performances) would place it as the thirty-fourth longest-running musical between *Show Boat* and *West Side Story*.

TABLE 1
 The Top Thirty:
 The Thirty Longest Running Musicals
 on Broadway, from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story*

	Musical	Performances
1.	<i>My Fair Lady</i> (1956)	2,717
2.	<i>Oklahoma!</i> (1943)	2,212
3.	<i>South Pacific</i> (1949)	1,925
4.	<i>The King and I</i> (1951)	1,246
5.	<i>Guys and Dolls</i> (1950)	1,200
6.	<i>Annie Get Your Gun</i> (1946)	1,147
7.	<i>Kiss Me, Kate</i> (1948)	1,070
8.	<i>Pajama Game</i> (1954)	1,063
9.	<i>Damn Yankees</i> (1955)	1,019
10.	<i>Bells Are Ringing</i> (1956)	924
11.	<i>Can-Can</i> (1953)	892
12.	<i>Carousel</i> (1945)	890
13.	<i>Fanny</i> (1954)	888
14.	<i>Follow the Girls</i> (1944)	882
15.	<i>Song of Norway</i> (1944)	860
16.	<i>Where's Charley?</i> (1948)	792
17.	<i>Gentlemen Prefer Blondes</i> (1949)	740
18.	<i>West Side Story</i> (1957)	732
19.	<i>High Button Shoes</i> (1947)	727
20.	<i>Finian's Rainbow</i> (1947)	725
21.	<i>Li'l Abner</i> (1956)	693
22.	<i>The Most Happy Fella</i> (1956)	676
23.	<i>Bloomer Girl</i> (1944)	654
24.	<i>Call Me Madam</i> (1950)	644
25.	<i>Wish You Were Here</i> (1952)	598
26.	<i>Kismet</i> (1953)	583
27.	<i>Brigadoon</i> (1947)	581
28.	<i>Show Boat</i> (1927)	572
29.	<i>One Touch of Venus</i> (1943)	567
30.	<i>Wonderful Town</i> (1953)	559

Ravel's *Bolero*, Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, or even Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* are more deserving of canonic status than any number of less popular works by these composers, it is equally misguided to canonize a cult musical.

TABLE 2

The Canonic Twelve:
The Broadway Canon
from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story*

1.	<i>Show Boat</i> (Kern and Hammerstein) [1927]
2.	<i>Porgy and Bess</i> (G. and I. Gershwin) [1935]
3.	<i>Pal Joey</i> (Rodgers and Hart) [1940]
4.	<i>Oklahoma!</i> (Rodgers and Hammerstein) [1943]
5.	<i>Carousel</i> (Rodgers and Hammerstein) [1945]
6.	<i>Kiss Me, Kate</i> (Porter) [1948]
7.	<i>South Pacific</i> (Rodgers and Hammerstein) [1949]
8.	<i>Guys and Dolls</i> (Loesser) [1950]
9.	<i>The King and I</i> (Rodgers and Hammerstein) [1951]
10.	<i>My Fair Lady</i> (Lerner and Loewe) [1956]
11.	<i>The Most Happy Fella</i> (Loesser) [1956]
12.	<i>West Side Story</i> (Bernstein and Sondheim) [1957]

The Broadway Canon: Outside
and Inside

Other musicals from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story* remain "outside the Broadway canon," however deserving they may be of canonic status. *Anything Goes* was one of the most popular musicals of its decade and has remained the most frequently revived musical of its time, but since these revivals bring in a new book and interpolated songs from other Cole Porter shows, the original *Anything Goes* went through an identity crisis that led to its expulsion from the canonic Broadway Eden. Similarly, although the most recent revival of Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's *On Your Toes* in 1983 retained the original score (somewhat rearranged) and orchestrations, it also offered a new book. Despite frequent revivals, critical acclaim, and the scholarly attention given it, *The Cradle Will Rock* remains more talked about than seen (or heard) and must be regarded as a cult classic washed over by the popular mainstream. Since Weill's once popularly successful *Lady in the Dark* in 1941 (book by Moss Hart, lyrics by Ira Gershwin) and *One Touch of Venus* in 1943 (book by S. J. Perelman, lyrics by Ogden Nash) have never enjoyed major New York revivals, these too lie outside of the canon, despite the high accolades bestowed on Weill's *Lady* whenever fine musicals are listed or discussed.

Perhaps the first writer to try to present a list of canonic musicals was Lehman Engel, the respected musical theater director and conductor, who in his pioneering critical study articulately defended his

choices of musicals that depict Broadway “in its most complete and mature state.”⁸ Although he acknowledges the superior score and lyrics of *Show Boat*, Engel considers only two musicals before *Pal Joey* in 1940, *Porgy and Bess* and Rodgers and Hart’s *The Boys from Syracuse*, as having books worthy of revival. In his chapter on “Broadway Opera,” however, Engel discusses *The Cradle Will Rock* as one of four important Broadway operas (along with *Porgy and Bess*, *The Most Happy Fella*, and Menotti’s *The Consul*). The twelve musicals in Engel’s canon start with *Pal Joey* and it includes no less than four shows by Rodgers and Hammerstein (*Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*), two by Lerner and Loewe (*Brigadoon* and *My Fair Lady*), two by Frank Loesser (*Guys and Dolls* and *Fella*), and one each by Irving Berlin (*Annie Get Your Gun*), Porter (*Kiss Me, Kate*), and Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim (*West Side Story*).

Kingman reinforces Broadway’s canonic borders when he states that “the musical show had its period of greatest achievement in the thirty years that began with *Show Boat* (1927) and ended with *West Side Story* (1957).”⁹ In direct contrast to Engel, Kingman praises the dramatic credibility and three-dimensional characterization of *Show Boat*, but the only other musical before *Pal Joey* to appear on Kingman’s little list is *Porgy and Bess*. Kingman also joins Engel in discussing *The Cradle Will Rock* in a chapter on opera (along with a second and more detailed discussion of *Porgy and Bess*). Kingman’s list of fifteen musicals includes two by Weill, *Lady in the Dark* and *Street Scene*, and a fifth musical by Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Allegro*, that were excluded from Engel’s list; missing from Kingman’s list are only two of Engel’s choices, *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Brigadoon*. Joseph Swain in his worthwhile survey of the Broadway musical from *Show Boat* to *A Chorus Line* devotes separate chapters to *Show Boat*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *Kiss Me, Kate*, *The Most Happy Fella*, *My Fair Lady*, and *West Side Story*. Space permitting, Swain would have included chapters on *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *Guys and Dolls*, but his exclusion of Weill, Blitzstein, and Rodgers and Hart was deliberate.¹⁰

Although differences of opinion—most notably the inclusion or exclusion of Weill—appear among these attempts to identify a body of canonic Broadway works, the same suspects are rounded up whenever musicals are discussed or listed, and it is now possible to speak of

⁸ Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theater* (New York: Collier Books, 1967; rev., 1975).

⁹ Kingman, p. 290.

¹⁰ Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Significantly, all the musicals that Swain discusses from this period occupy secure positions both in the repertory and the canon.

a consensus. More important, the criteria for inclusion acknowledged by Engel, Kingman, and Swain are also widely shared by other historians, critics, and list makers at large. Again, the musicals singled out were almost without exception hits in their own time, and nearly all have been successfully revived and have relished large helpings of critical acclaim based on the integration of their books, lyrics, and music. The Canonic Twelve shown in Table 2 unquestionably meet this criteria, and several others; for example, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Street Scene*, *Brigadoon*, and *Candide* might well have been admitted to this exclusive club or will be permitted to join in the future.

A number of additional generalizations can be offered about the Canonic Twelve. All members of this closely-knit family are adaptations, offspring of a literary source: two utilize collections of short stories (*South Pacific* and *Guys and Dolls*), three are adapted from novels (*Show Boat*, *Pal Joey*, and *The King and I*), and the remaining seven are based to varying degrees on plays (five modern and two by Shakespeare). Also striking is the fact that with the exception of *Porgy and Bess* no members of the Canonic Twelve appear between *Show Boat* and *Pal Joey* (1927–40), a state of affairs which neatly parallels the dearth of Top Thirty musicals between *Show Boat* in 1927 and *Oklahoma!* and *One Touch of Venus* in 1943.

Another remarkable characteristic of the Canonic Twelve is the brevity and homogeneity of the list: only seven composers and seven lyricists appear (if we include composer-lyricists Porter and Loesser twice), a statistic roughly analogous to the ten major league baseball players who have hit fifty or more home runs in a season seventeen times. Rodgers and Hammerstein have each contributed *five* canonic musicals, four with one another and a fifth with Lorenz Hart and Jerome Kern respectively. Loesser is responsible for two canonic musicals, and the Gershwins, Porter, Lerner and Loewe, Bernstein, and Sondheim (before *Gypsy* in 1959) have each contributed one canonic musical. The creators of these musicals are also connected through cross-collaboration, both simultaneous and successive. Hammerstein frequently worked with Kern (among others) before his partnership with Rodgers; Rodgers worked with Hart for twenty-five years before his seventeen with Hammerstein and five years after Hammerstein's death collaborated on a musical, *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (1965), with Sondheim, Hammerstein's protégé since the 1940s. Following the death of his brother George, Ira Gershwin wrote the lyrics for a hit, *Lady in the Dark* (1941), as well as a flop, *The Firebrand of Florence* (1945), with Weill, and a film, *Cover Girl* (1944), with Kern. In addition to his work with Loewe, Lerner collaborated with Weill on *Love Life* (1948) one year after *Brigadoon* and with Bernstein on *1600*

Pennsylvania Avenue, sixteen years after *Camelot* (1960), the last original Lerner and Loewe show. The only non-participants in these intertwining creative unions are Hart, who worked only with Rodgers, and Loesser, who collaborated with no other members of the Canonic Twelve.

One other characteristic common to the canonic composers might also be noted. Just as many are surprised when they learn of the middle-class backgrounds and classical musical educations of leading African-American jazz arrangers and pianists of the 1920s, including Fletcher Henderson and Earl Hines, there is a common misconception that Broadway “tunesmiths” are self-taught, musically illiterate, and uneducated. The seven *composers* of the canonic twelve, however, were either born into musical families or received early musical encouragement, most received a significant amount of formal or independent classical musical education at early stages of their careers. At least two, Gershwin and Weill, possessed a degree of skill and aspiration comparable to many classically trained composers, and Bernstein studied composition with Walter Piston at Harvard.

In the Beginning: *Show Boat*

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As the foundation of the Broadway canon, the arrival of *Show Boat* makes an appropriate starting point for a study of the modern American musical. No American musical before *Show Boat* has achieved unequivocal canonic status as defined in this essay: permanence in the repertoire *and* the critical respect due a masterpiece of a genre. By 1927 Berlin, Porter, Rodgers, and Weill (in Europe) had launched their careers, although with the exception of Kern their greatest triumphs would not come until the 1930s and 1940s. Also by 1927 the early masters of the musical, Victor Herbert, George M. Cohan, Rudolf Friml, and Sigmund Romberg had either completed or were nearing the end of their Broadway runs.

Before *Show Boat* the works that made the greatest initial and permanent impact on the American musical were Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* in 1879 and Lehár's *The Merry Widow* in 1907, a British and a Viennese export respectively. The early shows that displayed unequivocally American themes, the so-called Mulligan shows of Edward Harrigan and Tony Hart (1879–83), George M. Cohan's *Little Johnny Jones* in 1904 (“The Yankee Doodle Boy,” “Give My Regards to Broadway,”) and *Forty-five Minutes from Broadway* in 1906 (“Mary's a Grand Old Name” and “So Long Mary”) are nearly forgotten. But Cohan undoubtedly contributed the largest body of memorable American show songs before Kern and Berlin, songs like

"You're a Grand Old Flag," "Over There," and "Harrigan,"—in addition to those already mentioned—all of which are immortalized in the 1942 classic film biography, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, starring James Cagney. Herbert's *Naughty Marietta* (1911) and Kern's *Princess Shows* (1915–18) are frequently (the latter almost invariably) singled out as outstanding exponents of the American musical before *Show Boat* and perhaps are worthy of canonization, but unlike Gilbert and Sullivan and Lehár's imported classics, none of these American musicals or any others before *Show Boat* have entered either the repertoire or the Broadway canon.

The history of European classical music of the eighteenth and nineteenth century offers a useful paradigm for understanding the development of the Broadway musical between the late 1920s and early 1940s. Before Beethoven, European classical music was written mostly for immediate consumption rather than for posterity. Like movies and best sellers of our own time, eighteenth-century operas, both serious and comic, were composed for audiences eager to hear and see what was happening in their immediate present, and the revival of last year's opera was a relatively rare event. Similarly, book musicals (i.e., operettas and musical comedies) before Rodgers and Hammerstein rarely lasted beyond a season. Commercially this situation was possible because—in contrast to the extraordinary length of time necessary for recent musicals to turn a profit, normally more than two years—musicals before World War II required a matter of months to recoup their initial investment. Furthermore, for every "hit" show, another by the same team was waiting in the wings.

Show Boat, *Porgy and Bess*, and *Pal Joey* stand apart from their contemporaries much in the same way that Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, Handel's *Messiah*, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, and John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* remain among the few dramatic (albeit in the Bach and Handel classics, unstaged) works prior to Mozart's operas that are regularly revived. *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and their successors in the 1940s and 1950s—in common with Mozart operas of the 1780s and early 1790s—were written for the commercial theater of their own time but also remained in the repertoire. The new generation of Broadway composers that emerged in the 1960s shared with middle and late nineteenth-century composers—in opera the works of Verdi and Wagner—a growing awareness that a museum of recognized masterpieces was being built and that a standard had been established by which future works would be judged.

After *Show Boat* the musical with the greatest impact on the genre was without a doubt *Oklahoma!*, even if the various claims for its primogeniture can be disputed. *Oklahoma!* was not, as is often reported,

the first musical to contain a dream sequence, the first important musical adaptation of a legitimate play, the first musical to integrate ballet into its plot, the first musical to appear in a cast album, or even the first integrated musical. Nevertheless, in contrast to the isolated examples of the pioneering classical musicals, namely *Show Boat*, *Porgy and Bess*, and *Pal Joey*, the popular and critical success of *Oklahoma!* and two years later *Carousel* gave rise to a long series of imitators and a body of musicals that featured thoughtful adaptations, cast albums, and the integration of all dramatic elements, dialogue, dance, and story.

Just as Mozart composed for his time rather than ours, the prime consideration of musicals after *Oklahoma!* remained the creation of a hit show rather than "the pursuit of a musical ideal." And just as nineteenth-century composers began to observe the formation of a permanent collection in the musical museum, it became evident during the Rodgers and Hammerstein era that musicals could have an afterlife in the form of cast recordings, published piano-vocal scores, and rental materials.¹¹ Perhaps more important, the morning-after reviews that frequently influenced the initial success of a musical would increasingly evaluate a new musical on how well it measured up to the critical standards established by Rodgers and Hammerstein. After *West Side Story* most musicals remained commercial enterprises first and foremost, but would also, like their symphonic and operatic counterparts in the late-nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century, become increasingly concerned with "how to win space in the museum, hung on the wall next to the 'classics,' with an expectation of permanent display."¹²

The central criteria by which a classical masterpiece after Beethoven was recognized as such was the degree to which it resembled an organism, one part growing out of another, and a nineteenth-century composition would not achieve canonic status unless the parts of the organism related to the whole.¹³ By the latter half of the nineteenth century the principles of thematic unity, which were largely manifested in instrumental compositions, became increasingly

¹¹ See Burkholder, "Museum Pieces: The Historicist Mainstream in Music of the Last Hundred Years," *The Journal of Musicology* II, (Spring 1983), 115–34 for a provocative study of how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concert literature has been canonized and placed in musical museums. The indebtedness of the present essay to Burkholder's "Museum Pieces" should be self evident.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹³ For valuable critical surveys on the relationship between organicism and analysis see Joseph Kerman, "How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out," *Critical Inquiry* VII (Winter 1980), 311–31, and Ruth A. Solie, "The Living Work: Organicism and Musical Analysis," *19th-Century Music* IV (1980), 147–56.

applied to integrated dramatic works, and the operas of Wagner came to be judged and praised for their motivic unity, a unity that, significantly, was largely generated through the orchestra rather than the voice. Twentieth-century music of all types, including jazz, would continue to be evaluated on the basis of its organic and motivic unity.¹⁴

The organic model as represented in the symphonic operas of Wagner has a counterpart "ideal type" in the post-Rodgers and Hammerstein musical.¹⁵ The "ideal type" of musical was an "integrated" musical, and after Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals would be judged to a large extent on how well they conformed to their model. In an integrated musical, like its operatic counterpart, the various parts of the whole—song, story, and movement—not only resembled an organism in which each successive part grew naturally from its predecessor, but together the diverse elements formed a related and homogeneous whole.

Twentieth-century critics of opera beginning with Kerman in *Opera as Drama* (first published in 1956) have gone beyond "integration" as an ideal operatic type and have become increasingly concerned with a more rarified concept: music as drama.¹⁶ According to Kerman, "music can contribute to drama" by "defining character, generating action, and establishing atmosphere."¹⁷ By these standards Kerman allows only a handful of operatic masterpieces by Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, Berg, and Stravinsky, into an operatic canon. Is it possible or wise to apply Kerman's standard to the Broadway canon? And what's the use of wondering about this?

To answer these questions it is important to mention a stylistic characteristic that often distinguishes musical comedies from operettas and both of these sub-genres from operas: the degree to which music advances the action, as for example in Mozart or Verdi ensembles or Wagner's music dramas. Eric Salzman, who considers the

¹⁴ For the application of an organic and motivic standard to jazz recordings see Gunther Schuller, "Sonny Rollins and Thematic Improvising" in *Jazz Panorama*, edited by Martin Williams (New York and London: Da Capo, 1979), pp. 239–52, and Schuller's monumental survey of jazz from its origins through the mid-1940s, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) and *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ The notion of the "ideal type" comes from an essay published by Max Weber in 1904 and developed by music historian Carl Dahlhaus in his *Nineteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989). See Philip Gossett's excellent critique of this view, "Carl Dahlhaus and the 'Ideal Type,'" in *19th-Century Music* XII (1989), 49–56, and "Up from Beethoven" in *The New York Review of Books*, 26 October 1989, 21–26.

¹⁶ Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

American musical a fusion of musical comedy and operetta, both employing spoken dialogue “to carry the action forward,” writes that “the musical makes no attempt to tell a story musically but creates heightened moments in the form of songs and ensembles and, to some extent, a characteristic musical climate.”¹⁸ He then contrasts musicals with opera, a genre which, since it is inhabited by characters “generally larger than life . . . seems to allow or even require them to sing all the time.”¹⁹

But if Salzman’s criteria are true for most musicals, operettas and musical comedies alike, *canonic* operettas and occasionally even canonic musical comedies often succeed in demonstrating a musical continuity analogous to Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner, and the music in these works often defines character, generates action, and establishes atmosphere. Music (more specifically, arias) in most Baroque operas, as in most musical comedies and operettas, is generally used to reflect on the action, not to advance it, and Italian baroque opera and most Broadway musical comedies also commonly share a devotion to a star system. But canonic musical comedies, like the best of Handelian opera, at the very least demand great songs and a convincing placement of these songs. The absence of a complete integration between the book and the music of a continuity found in late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century operas can be readily excused if the book provides a sturdy vehicle on which to hang the songs and if the songs themselves are memorable and flow naturally from the book (even if they more than occasionally stop the show).

The Canonic Twelve contains no revues, two operas (*Porgy and Bess* and *The Most Happy Fella*), two unadulterated musical comedies (*Pal Joey* and *Guys and Dolls*), and eight operettas. Several operettas from the Twelve, for example, *Show Boat*, *Carousel*, and *West Side Story* (as well as the Gershwin and Loesser operas and much of Weill and Blitzstein) pass Salzman’s “one basic test” to qualify as a legitimate Broadway opera: “The use of music for essential dramatic movement.”²⁰ The contemporary operetta/musical comedy hybrid *Kiss Me*,

¹⁸ Eric Salzman, “Whither American Music Theater?” *The Musical Quarterly* LXV (April 1979), 234.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

²⁰ Kerman, p. 238. As opera singers cross over to the realm of the traditional Broadway musical like lemmings, the lines between operas and musicals get increasingly blurry. In fact, a strong case can be made that the differences between operas and musicals in the 1980s and 1990s have more to do with the ways they are created and the disparate economic procedures between Broadway and opera houses than with genre distinctions. On similarities and differences between operas and musicals see George Martin, “On the Verge of Opera: Stephen Sondheim,” *The Opera Quarterly* VI (Spring 1989), 76–85, Harold C. Schonberg, “Why Isn’t a Musical Comedy an Opera?” *The New York Times*, 25 November 1979, sec. 2, p. 1, and Mark Swed, “What Opera and Musicals

Kate is taxonomically more ambiguous, but arguably shares more features commonly associated with operetta. As with most operettas, operatically trained singers are handy for those cast in the lead roles (Lilli/Kate and Fred/Petruchio). Moreover, its clever operetta parodies and intricate part writing of its ensembles feeds the hands it bites. Not surprisingly, *Kate* has from its inception served as the most frequently performed American musical in light opera houses around the world.

Numerous musical comedies from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story*, canonic or otherwise, have achieved a lasting and unsurpassed legacy of popular songs, workable and integrated books (even in their original state), convincing transitions from dialogue to music, subtle relationships and equivalences between music and lyrics, and other ingenious dramaturgical devices; for example, ballet as an integral component of the plot in *On Your Toes* and *Pal Joey* and significant musical continuity in the dream sequences of *Lady in the Dark*. Who could ask for anything more? Nevertheless, canonic operettas and operas (with the exception of perhaps *My Fair Lady*) generally make greater musical demands than their musical comedy counterparts, often exhibit deeper levels of continuity and integration, and allow music to convey character and dramatic values to a degree and subtlety not usually evident even in the most brilliant musical comedies. Not only do they arguably represent the finest accomplishments in American musical theater of their respective decades, at least four musicals at the center of the canon between 1927 and 1957—*Show Boat*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Carousel*, and *West Side Story*—have earned both a place in the repertoire and a critical stature unsurpassed by almost any operas of their time. The European operatic ideal is within Broadway's grasp.

Rodgers and Hart's *Pal Joey* is the first musical comedy to appear on nearly every list of canonic musicals and *Carousel*, Rodgers's personal favorite among his nearly fifty musicals, conveys musically-generated dramatic action far beyond the achievements of *Oklahoma! Kiss Me, Kate* is Porter's first and most successful attempt to deal with the "anxiety of influence" (so named by literary critic Harold Bloom) brought about by the Rodgers and Hammerstein challenge.²¹ The 1950s classics *My Fair Lady*, *The Most Happy Fella*, and *West Side Story*,

Share: Not Much, William Bolcom Finds," *The New York Times*, 1 April 1990, sec. 2, pp. 29f.

²¹ See Joseph Straus, *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1990) for a musical interpretation of Bloom's "anxiety of influence" as manifest in the compositions and writings of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Webern, Berg, and Bartók.

build on the Rodgers and Hammerstein model, and Bernstein's classic arguably surpasses all of its predecessors in its exhibition of meaningful movement as well as its organic unity (integration) and its intricate and ingenious metaphoric musical equivalences that support dramatic meanings.

Happily Ever After *West Side Story* and the Price of Membership

The early 1960s marked the end of one Broadway era and the beginning of another. Between 1955 and 1961 audiences had their last chance to see a first-run show by Porter, Bernstein, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, or Loesser—the core of the canon. The continuing careers of Rodgers without Hammerstein and Lerner without Loewe failed to produce any new musicals of lasting popular appeal or universal critical acceptance. At the same time the old guard was completing their Broadway tenure a talented new generation of lyricists and composers was making its opening marks: Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick in *Fiorello!* (1959), Charles Strouse and Lee Adams in *Bye Bye Birdie* (1960), Cy Coleman in *Wildcat* (1960), Jerry Herman in *Milk and Honey* (1961), Sondheim in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), and John Kander and Fred Ebb in *Flora, the Red Menace* (1965). The future will generate a more definitive short list of canonic musicals after *West Side Story*, but Meredith Willson's *The Music Man* (which opened several months later), Sondheim and Jule Styne's *Gypsy* (1959), Bock and Harnick's *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), and Kander and Ebb's *Cabaret* (1966)—among musicals of the late 1950s and 1960s and any number of Sondheim shows since *Company* in 1970—seem particularly likely candidates.

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It is not too early, however, to notice that shortly after *West Side Story* a new and lasting disparity between popularity and critical acclaim arose. Even Rodgers and Hammerstein's extraordinarily popular and Tony Award-winning swan song, *The Sound of Music* in 1959 (surpassed only by *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*) and Loesser's Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* in 1961 (which surpassed all other Loesser shows, including *Guys and Dolls*) have not managed to garner the critical stature of their predecessors.

While there exists some correlation after 1960 or so between popularity (as measured by long runs and revivability) and critical acclaim (as measured by awards such as the Tony and the New York Drama Critics Circle), the correlation does not begin to approach the earlier

correlations between popular and critical success observed in the canon from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story* in Tables 1 and 2. Such disparities between popular appeal and critical acclaim have a clearly discernible counterpart in the history of European classical music in the early twentieth century. The musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein, like the operas of Verdi and Wagner and the instrumental music of Brahms, are both popular and respectfully regarded, a winning combination of distinction that has led to their present canonic stature. With the rise of modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many of the most highly acclaimed composers were and remain far less popular than their less acclaimed contemporaries. Brahms, like Rodgers and Hammerstein, was both popular and critically successful. In the early twentieth century Schoenberg and Rachmaninoff form extreme cases of composers who respectively have earned critical respect or popular acclaim, but have fallen far short of attaining both.

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The Broadway equivalent of this phenomenon is best illustrated by the work of Stephen Sondheim, who by the late 1980s had received an unprecedented collection of accolades for his musicals: five Tony Awards, seven New York Drama Critics Circle Awards, and even a Pulitzer Prize for *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984). Of course, Sondheim's musicals do have a loyal popular following, many have broken even financially, and in *Forum* he had a major hit on his first try. But to place Sondheim's musicals at the center of the canon after 1970, it is necessary to revise the canonic criteria adopted for Broadway's Golden Age from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story*. No longer must a canonic musical enjoy both the popular and critical acclaim of a Beethoven symphony. Like the music of the modernist canon between 1890 and 1914, if Sondheim's modernist musicals achieve canonization, the universal popularity enjoyed by Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* may continue to elude *Company* and *Follies* or even *Sweeney Todd* and *Sunday in the Park with George*.²²

In the generation after *West Side Story* the modernist elements of Sondheim's powerful non-narrative, conceptual, musically dissonant, dramatically disturbing, occasionally violent, and nearly always challenging musicals on first glance stand out more than their traditionalism. But a central feature of Sondheim's modernist musicals, like his modernist predecessors, it is a thorough absorption and self-conscious utilization of the past. Yet in contrast to Schoenberg, who has come to represent a convenient paradigm for musical modernism, Sondheim

²² See J. Peter Burkholder, "Brahms and Twentieth-Century Classical Music," *19th-Century Music* VIII (Summer 1984), 75–83.

does not stake his claim to historical primacy. In fact, Sondheim does not think that any musical besides *Porgy and Bess* deserves or will achieve a lasting legacy.

Sondheim's modernism may seem tame compared to the modernism of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Ives, or even Debussy and Mahler, perhaps the only two modernists who have achieved popularity as well as critical approbation. But compared to the vastly more popular musicals of Jerry Herman and Andrew Lloyd Webber, Sondheim's musicals are modern indeed. Nevertheless, although Sondheim did not fall from grace as Weill did when the chameleon-like German started his career as a bona fide modernist before his retreat from the abyss of *Mahagonny*, even a Broadway composer of Sondheim's stature and uncompromising artistic principles has not entirely escaped charges of commercialization or failure to measure up to the standards imposed on composers of "real" opera. Weill may have figuratively (if not usually literally) sold out to Broadway audiences, but he retained his integrity by taking the trouble to orchestrate his own shows. Thus even Sondheim, the musical modernist, because, unlike his predecessors from Monteverdi to Gershwin he has failed to fulfill this obligation, has been denied admission by some to the Operatic Eden.²³

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As American musicals join the operatic mainstream and gain in scholarly and critical stature, they also inherit the problems that have long faced the established classics of the European operatic repertory. Some well-known examples of these problems include Bizet's *Carmen* (a critical edition that disregards and reinserts the composer's well-considered deletions), Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* (productions that omit or minimize the distasteful but purposeful jingoistic passage sung by Hans Sachs), or most commonly those works that fall prey to misrepresentations traceable to performance traditions: the nearly invariable but historically unjustified inclusion of both the Prague and Vienna arias of Don Ottavio in productions and recordings of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, or the frequent incorporation of Mahler's "innovation" of playing the *Leonore* Overture No. 3 before the final scene in performances of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Broadway musicals have already begun to face equally excruciating exemplars of problematic editions, interpretations, and performance practices.

Collaborative necessities of both Broadway and the European operatic mainstream often required compromise—a star must have a song here, another song is too difficult and must be replaced, the show is too long and cuts need to be made. But canonic musicals, like

²³ Martin, p. 80.

many of their classical operatic counterparts, thrive on compromise, and neither the European canon nor Broadway's Canonic Twelve, however unique they may be, can be characterized as historical accidents. Of course, it is not a coincidence either that the Broadway canon is comprised of those works that most closely approach the standards and ideals established by the European operatic canon from Mozart to Berg. The musicals that have entered the canon or merit future canonization represent the most thoughtful, imaginative, and generally most consuming work of their creators, composers, lyricists, librettists, choreographers, scenographers, and directors who often consciously set out to surpass the expectations of their genre and their time, whether by musical and lyrical sophistication, by dramatic credibility, or by greater unification of music, drama, and dance. The Rockies may crumble and Gibraltar may tumble but the Broadway canon between *Show Boat* and *West Side Story* is apparently here to stay. At the very least, as Sondheim's characters in *Follies* tell it, the Canonic Twelve "will see us through till something better comes along."