

Developing wider listening – musical theatre: part 2

Simon Rushby

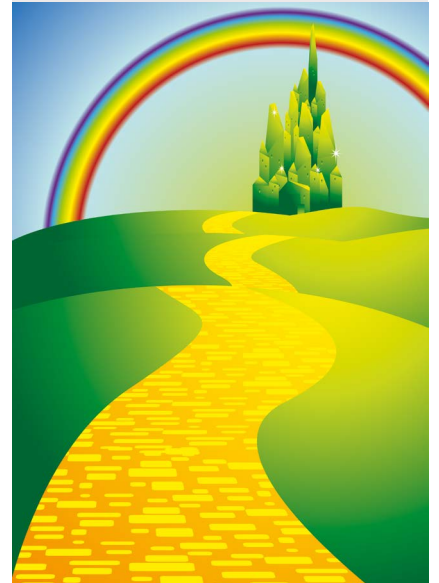
Introduction

[Part one](#) of our whistle-stop tour of musical theatre focused on the way in which musicals are written, exploring their structure and the role of different songs within the story. We examined the links between musical theatre and opera, and traced the genre back to its Broadway and West End beginnings in the 1920s and 30s, particularly with the music of George Gershwin and Jerome Kern.

This month, we'll take a journey from the time of these composers, at the end of the 1930s, to the present day. As war once again broke out around the world, we'll see how musical theatre thrived as audiences sought respite from the stresses of everyday life, and how the emotional power of musicals means that the genre still manages to be as vibrant and successful today as it was nearly 80 years ago.

As before, we'll pick out some examples and identify performing, composing and listening activities that can help students to increase their depth of knowledge and understand the context of this genre in the 20th and 21st centuries. This, of course, will help them to be more confident in talking and writing about unfamiliar music, and help them to enjoy listening and playing on new levels.

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The 1930s and 40s

Discussion activity: songs in films

One of the most successful and important films of the late 1930s – and in the history of musicals – was *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) which propelled the 16-year-old Judy Garland to international stardom. The music for the film was written by Harold Arlen, with words by Yip Harburg, and they punctuated the action with catchy, singable song-and-dance numbers staged in the Technicolor world of Oz.

However, the film's most famous song nearly didn't make it into the final cut. 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' is sung by Dorothy (Garland) very close to the start of the movie, when she's living at her aunt and uncle's farm in Kansas. It's an 'I want' song, set up deliberately to introduce the character of Dorothy to the audience and give us insights into her hopes and dreams.

But some of those involved in producing the movie initially felt that the song was too slow and too full of adult emotions to appeal to young people, especially as it was the first song they'd hear. There was strong opinion from some quarters that the song should be cut, but when two prominent producers threatened to walk away from the production if it was, the decision was made to leave it in. The song went on to win the Academy Award for best original song, and composer Herbert Stothart also won an Oscar for his incidental music.

Listening exercise: 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow'

Listen to the entire song here (www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TOBzT-1LFU), and get your students to discuss and formulate answers to the following questions:

- 1 The first verse, usually known as the **refrain**, runs from 0:27 to 0:47. How many more times do we hear this refrain (though with different words each time)?
- 2 The contrasting section, known as the **bridge**, begins at 1:11. How is it different to the refrain? Think about the shape of the melody, the harmony and the rhythm.
- 3 The **coda** completes the song from 2:16 onwards. Where did we hear this music before?
- 4 Why do you think her performance of this song propelled the 16-year-old Judy Garland to worldwide fame?

See [part one](#) of this resource if you need to remind your students about types of songs in musicals.



The Richard Rodgers Theatre in New York's Broadway district, which currently hosts *Hamilton*

Rodgers and Hammerstein

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II were both working independently, and successfully, before they teamed up in the early 1940s. Rodgers enjoyed a highly productive partnership with lyricist Lorenz (or Larry) Hart, writing 26 Broadway shows including many songs that are still famous as standards today – for example 'Blue Moon' (originally written in 1934 and appearing in many films) and 'My Funny Valentine' from *Babes in Arms* (1937).

Hart had sadly become too ill to work by the early 1940s, and Rodgers sought a new collaborator. Hammerstein had seen success with Jerome Kern, particularly with *Show Boat*, which we looked at in part one, and Rodgers had known him since the mid-1920s. They got together to work on *Oklahoma!*, which, when it opened on Broadway in 1943, set new parameters for the genre, being one of the first shows to ensure every song and dance number was integral to the plot and advanced the story in some way.

This and four other huge hits for the pair – *Carousel* (1945), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951) and their last show, *The Sound of Music* (1959) – marked a golden age in musical theatre and cemented their reputation as one of the greatest creative partnerships of the 20th century. All five of these shows have had numerous successful runs in New York, London and around the world, and all have been made into films, winning a number of Academy Awards. The film version of *The Sound of Music* (1965) won five Oscars including for best picture and best director for Robert Wise, who had also won four years earlier for his direction of *West Side Story*.

A *Music Teacher* online resource from [April 2018](#) looks in detail at the music of Richard Rodgers and includes two activities – an analysis and a listening exercise – on songs from *Carousel* and *The Sound of Music*. It's geared to Key Stage 5, but you may wish to challenge GCSE students with it. In this resource, we'll focus on a comparison activity that can help students to identify some of the features of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical style.

Comparison activity: the musical style of Rodgers and Hammerstein

Here are three examples of Rodgers and Hammerstein songs, taken in chronological order and covering the 14 years when they wrote their most celebrated shows. They're all **company numbers**, meaning they're for the majority of the cast – principals and chorus – to sing.

Watch them (or a portion of each one) with your students, and ask your students to think about how Rodgers's music and Hammerstein's lyrics evolved and changed over those 14 years, led by these and other questions:

- ▶ Describe the vocal melodies. How does Richard Rodgers make them 'catchy' and memorable?
 - ▶ How are the songs accompanied? Name some of the principal instruments you hear, and describe the music they play.
 - ▶ How do the lyrics set the scene and describe the feelings of the characters? How might they be relevant to the plot as a whole, bearing in mind that Hammerstein always strove to advance the story with his lyrics?
 - ▶ How are the characters used in the songs? Think about when they sing as a group, and how Rodgers and Hammerstein write for individual singers. Is it obvious who the main characters are, and what they're thinking?
 - ▶ What similarities, in terms of musical style, can you hear in these three songs?
- 1 'Oklahoma!' from *Oklahoma!* (original show: 1943; film version: 1955) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbrnXl2gO_k) The main characters Curly and Laurey celebrate their marriage and look forward to settling in their new home, supported by their family and friends. You might also want to show your students this version (www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrzQm1QSjMs), from the 1998 stage production starring Hugh Jackman (who, of course, went on to play Wolverine as well as PT Barnum in *The Greatest Showman*).
 - 2 'June is Bustin' Out All Over' from *Carousel* (original show: 1945; film version: 1956) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=khL3AVmPj24) In this deftly produced song-and-dance number, the fishermen and their families and friends celebrate the onset of summer and all the fun and excitement that it brings.
 - 3 'Getting To Know You' from *The King and I* (original show: 1951; film version: 1956) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vlx6gQWfjpo). Anna, a British teacher employed by the King of Siam (now Thailand) in an attempt to modernise his country, interacts with her pupils in this wonderful song and dance number. The choreography, by Jerome Robbins (who went on to work on *West Side Story*) is wonderful to watch, especially in how it uses the children to imitate Anna's skirt.

If your students recognise Deborah Kerr's singing voice, it might be because they've heard it in other film musicals. Kerr was **dubbed** (her voice substituted) by Marni Nixon, who also supplied the singing voice of Natalie Wood in *West Side Story* and Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady*, as well as being three singing geese in *Mary Poppins*!

Cole Porter

While Richard Rodgers was making his name with first Larry Hart and then Oscar Hammerstein II, another American composer, Cole Porter, enjoyed huge success in the musical theatre genre without linking up with a lyricist. Porter, grandson of a millionaire who enjoyed a privileged education (at Yale and Harvard) and lived a lavish lifestyle, wrote both music and lyrics to a number of very famous songs of the 1920s, 30s and 40s. Some of these songs appeared in his shows, which included *Anything Goes* (1934) and *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), and others appeared in major films of the time.

Porter travelled widely, living in New York, California and Paris, and his songs reflected his upmarket background, becoming known for their sophistication, wit and topical commentary. Some of his best known include ‘Night and Day’, ‘I Get a Kick Out of you’, ‘I’ve Got You Under My Skin’ and ‘I Love Paris’, but he was perhaps most revered for his cleverly constructed **catalogue** or **list** songs, two of which we’ll take a look at now.

Cole Porter’s list songs

A list song is usually a humorous song based on a list that often becomes more and more absurd as it progresses. Perhaps the most famous from the world of opera is Mozart’s ‘Catalogue Aria’ from his opera *Don Giovanni* (1787), in which the title character’s servant, Leporello, tells one of Don Giovanni’s girlfriends about his master’s many lovers all over Europe. It can be found, with subtitles, here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtJ1VqeyrCI

Two fine examples from Cole Porter are ‘You’re the Top’ and ‘Friendship’, both from *Anything Goes*. Play each of them to your students and ask them to think about why the list song concept might have been so popular with theatre audiences, as well as with composers.

‘You’re the Top’: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMaHscozggw

‘Friendship’: www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsVdFNRWdkk

The great thing about list songs from a composing point of view is once you’ve hit on an idea, the song almost writes itself! The structure of the two songs mentioned is verse-based and repetitive, so that the focus can be on the words, which in the case of ‘You’re the Top’ are very topical to the 1930s.

Other list songs that you could explore with your students include ‘Anything You Can Do’ from Irving Berlin’s *Annie Get Your Gun* (1956) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=WO23WBji_Zo) and Stephen Sondheim’s ‘A Little Priest’ from *Sweeney Todd* (1979) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZukfGuYBGyQ).

The 1950s

Porter's *Kiss Me, Kate* was based on the Shakespeare play *The Taming of the Shrew*, one of the first of a number of musicals based on existing plays. American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein, like Gershwin before him, crossed back and forth from opera and symphonic compositions to musicals, writing *On The Town* in 1944 and – perhaps his greatest work – *West Side Story* in 1957, which was a re-working of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* set in New York.

This musical, and its subsequent multi-Oscar-winning movie of 1961, was known for its vibrant, jazz- and Latin-influenced score, the fresh choreography of Jerome Robbins and the cutting-edge lyrics, penned by up-and-coming composer Stephen Sondheim. However, the race-related gang warfare of New York proved less popular in 1957 than the mid-western safety of Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*, which enjoyed better ticket receipts in its first year than Bernstein's blockbuster.

America continued to dominate the musicals scene in the 1950s, and nearly all the major Broadway productions of this decade became Hollywood movies, including Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls* (1950) and Lerner and Loewe's *Paint Your Wagon* (1951) and *My Fair Lady* (1956).

Listening activity: love across the divide

A common theme in musicals of 1950s America was love affairs between two people from different backgrounds, and writers loved to explore themes of class, race and morality in the context of love. Here are three examples of 'love across the divide' themes, and songs that underline them, for you to discuss and compare with your students. Some questions to guide their thinking:

- ▶ How does the lyricist convey the emotions of love and the challenges of the 'divide' in the song?
- ▶ How are the emotions of the song emphasised in the music?
- ▶ What musical features enhance the drama?
- ▶ How are the songs structured? How is the plot moved forwards/the story told, through the music?

1 *Guys and Dolls*: 'If I Were a Bell' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_T9_iwAIDo) is sung by the character Sarah Brown (played in the film here by Jean Simmons), a pious mission worker who's been taken to Havana to have dinner by gambler Sky Masterson (Marlon Brando) for a bet. She gets drunk and sings this song as she appears to be falling in love with him, despite her morals telling her otherwise, though Sky – a good man underneath the hustler exterior – does not take advantage of her.

2 *My Fair Lady*: 'I've Grown Accustomed to her Face' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=VT86ME8sX74) is sung by Professor Henry Higgins (Rex Harrison) as he realises the cockney girl Eliza Doolittle (Audrey Hepburn) to whom he gave elocution lessons, and who appears to have fallen for another man, has won his heart. An interesting side-note is that Harrison was not a singer, and 'spoke' most of his songs in both the Broadway show and the film, though Hepburn was dubbed by singer Marni Nixon.

3 *West Side Story*: 'A Boy Like That' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=GrFkgyOOY3o) is a powerful duet between Maria (Natalie Wood) and her brother's girlfriend Anita (Rita Moreno). Both girls are Puerto Ricans living in New York, and Maria has fallen in love with Tony, a native New Yorker who has accidentally killed her brother in a fight. Bernstein's music and Sondheim's lyrics transport the mood from anger to empathy, as both characters realise that they are united by the power of their love.

The 1960s and 70s

By the 1960s, the wave of popular music that had started with artists like Elvis Presley had taken over the airwaves, and in both Britain and America bands like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Beach Boys were dominating popular culture. Musical theatre managed to retain its 'traditional' style with classics like Jerry Bock's *Fiddler on the Roof* and Jerry Herman's *Hello, Dolly!* (both 1964), but it was clear to many that musicals needed to move with the times, and some major composers undertook to do just this.

Stephen Sondheim, who like Cole Porter mostly wrote both music and lyrics for his shows, took a less 'classic' approach and created shows that were often complex, artistically challenging and dark, though with captivating songs that became classics. His best-known musicals were *Company* (1970), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Sweeney Todd* (1979) and *Into the Woods* (1986), the latter cleverly combining the stories of several fairy tales. His song 'Send in the Clowns' from *A Little Night Music* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvZex3Qf7QQ) is definitely worth listening to.

While Sondheim created a new, modern style, other musicals of the 1960s and 70s embraced the rock and pop genres that were so popular at the time, doing away with the jazzy or orchestral scores that had been associated with musicals for 40 years. Galt MacDermot's *Hair* (1967) had rock music at its core and was a show for its time, tackling issues of hippie culture, the Vietnam War and sexuality. It was a huge hit, and it paved the way for the more rock/pop style of the 1970s, as did Stephen Schwarz's first major musical, *Godspell* (1971) which was based on parables and other extracts from the Bible. Schwarz went on to write for Disney and his best-known musical, *Wicked*, opened on Broadway in 2003.

Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice

Andrew Lloyd Webber is the son of composer William Lloyd Webber, and wrote music from a young age. He met pop song lyricist Tim Rice when he was 17 and Rice was 20. The two began writing together in the mid-1960s and had their first success with *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (1968), based on the story from the Old Testament and written for a prep school choir in London. Though it started as a concert piece, its use of popular styles such as rock 'n' roll, calypso and country made it a prime candidate for the West End, and an expanded version opened there in 1973. By that time, the pair had also had a hit with *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970), which was originally conceived as an album but ran as a show in the West End for more than eight years. Its story, based on the life of Christ as told in the New Testament but not including the Resurrection, caused some controversy, which probably helped in publicising the show.

Lloyd Webber and Rice had another major hit – first as an album in 1976, and then as a show in 1978 – with *Evita*, based on the life of Argentina's first lady Eva Perón. This catapulted the British singer Elaine Paige and the American Patti LuPone to stardom in the West End and Broadway productions respectively. After this, Lloyd Webber and Rice went their separate ways, and Lloyd Webber teamed up with others to write some of the best-known musicals of recent times, including *Cats* (1981), *Starlight Express* (1984) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986). All of these shows broke box office records: *Cats* ran for 18 years and *Phantom* is still running today. Other Lloyd Webber shows include *Aspects of Love* (1989), *Sunset Boulevard* (1993) and *Cinderella* (2021).

Much more detail – and listening activities – on Stephen Sondheim can be found in a [Music Teacher resource from May 2018](#).

Listening, analysis and performing activity: ‘Memory’

Fresh from her success playing the lead in *Evita*, Elaine Paige was cast as Grizabella in Lloyd Webber’s next production, *Cats*. Her character’s signature song was ‘Memory’, where she reflects on her glittering past as a ‘glamour cat’, now that she’s fallen on hard times.

Here is Paige singing the song, and below is part of the melody for the first verse:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdBVJbzkoqo

Working in pairs or groups with a keyboard or other melody instrument, can students fill in the missing bars and then play the melody, along with the chords indicated?

Following this activity, get students to look at how Lloyd Webber constructs the melody. How does he use small, two-bar melodic **cells**, with **repetition** and **stepwise** melody, to construct the verse? What can they say about his use of rhythmic repetition? What is interesting about the tenth bar?

Other musicals of the 1970s and 1980s

While Lloyd Webber and Rice were taking the musical world by storm, other notable and perhaps more ‘traditional’ shows were doing well. Fred Ebb and John Kander wrote *Cabaret* in 1966 and *Chicago* in 1975, both of which have enjoyed long-lasting popularity. Marvin Hamlisch had success on Broadway with *A Chorus Line* (1975), and, perhaps inspired by the tragic storyline of Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd*, French duo Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg wrote *Les misérables* which opened in London in 1985 and continues to run on both sides of the Atlantic. Based on Victor Hugo’s giant novel, *Les misérables* silenced critics who thought that the storyline was too complex and serious for a musical, and the show gave us some of musical theatre’s best-known songs, including ‘I Dreamed a Dream’ and ‘On My Own’. Boublil and Schönberg followed up their success with *Miss Saigon* (1989).

[The Music Teacher resource](#) on AQA’s Musical Theatre AoS from May 2018 contains more about the music of Schönberg and Boublil.

The 1990s

The Walt Disney company had been making movies with hugely successful musical soundtracks since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, and in the 1990s made the decision to create theatre versions of some of its best-loved films, focusing on lavish staging and breathtaking costumes and design. *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* were huge hits, the former featuring music by Alan Menken and the latter by Elton John and Tim Rice. Menken had been recruited by Disney following the success of his 1982 show *Little Shop of Horrors* (covered [here](#)) and went on to write many of Disney's best-loved songs. Meanwhile, playwright Willy Russell's *Blood Brothers* (1983) and New Yorker Jonathan Larson's *Rent* (1996) also enjoyed considerable success.

Musical theatre since 2000

Rent's cutting-edge look at the reality of 1990s life in New York's underground inspired a new generation of musical theatre fans, and in the 2000s shows like *Songs for a New World* (Jason Robert Brown) and *Spring Awakening* (Duncan Sheik) sprang up for this new, youthful audience. The very risqué *Avenue Q* – which featured puppets controlled by visible actors – was the surprising hit of the decade, and new theatrical versions of films such as Mel Brooks's *The Producers* and Monty Python's *Spamalot* also enjoyed success.

The 2000s also saw the huge rise in popularity of **jukebox musicals** – where a story is written to fit around the songs of a well-known band or artist, cashing in on the decade's love for nostalgia. These include *Mamma Mia* (Abba), *We Will Rock You* (Queen) and *Jersey Boys* (The Four Seasons) and there have been many more, featuring the music of artists like Michael Jackson, Madness, Billy Joel, the Drifters, Buddy Holly, Carole King, the Temptations and Tina Turner.

Very successful movie versions of classic musicals were released in the 2000s and 2010s, such as *Evita*, *Chicago*, *Mamma Mia* and *Sweeney Todd*. This in turn inspired some movie directors to make new musicals for the screen rather than for the stage, the most notable of these being *Moulin Rouge* (2001), *La La Land* (2016) and *The Greatest Showman* (2017).

While *Moulin Rouge* included a variety of reworked existing numbers from different composers and artists – ranging from David Bowie to Elton John – the success of *La La Land* and *The Greatest Showman* was partly due to new songs by up-and-coming composers Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, including the award-winning hits 'City of Stars' and 'This is Me'. Pasek and Paul's best-known stage show to date is *Dear Evan Hansen*, which opened on Broadway in 2016 and in the West End in 2019. Its film version was released in 2021.

Finally, this look at some of the highlights of musical theatre would be incomplete without mention of Lin-Manuel Miranda, who has effectively redefined the genre with his two shows *In The Heights* (2005) and *Hamilton* (2015), starring in the title role of the latter when it opened on Broadway. Miranda brought hip hop to the Broadway stage, pulling heavily from the genre as well as from soul, pop, R&B and more traditional-sounding show tunes. Let's finish with a small exploration of Miranda's influences, in three songs from *Hamilton*.

There's an activity based on *Rent* in part one of this resource

Jason Robert Brown gets a detailed section in the [Music Teacher resource](#) from May 2018.

The many genres of *Hamilton*

In these three songs, we see Miranda's clever combination of different classic genres to create a fresh, modern sound that has ensured *Hamilton*'s incredible success around the world. For each song, I've provided a 'reference track' so that students can draw comparisons and find links between Miranda's music and music that has gone before.

'My Shot' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1izVfVpBwE) is the third song of the show, where Alexander Hamilton and other young revolutionaries demonstrate their speech-giving skills by describing their beliefs and aspirations. The song is almost all rapped, in hip-hop style reminiscent of hits such as 'Lose Yourself' by Eminem (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nhe-LJLZMHk) which featured in his movie *8 Mile* (2002).

'The Schuyler Sisters' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=POHVEguCNAY) is the fifth song and introduces Angelica, Eliza and Peggy Schuyler in R&B style, reminiscent of Destiny's Child and TLC, in a song such as 'No Scrubs' by TLC (www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrLequ6dUdM).

'The Room Where It Happens' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=WySzEXKUSZw), a song for Aaron Burr from Act 2, draws from musical theatre's jazzy past, reminding us of any number of classic show tunes thanks to its New Orleans-like groove and the presence of a banjo in the band! Compare it with 'Herod's Song' from *Jesus Christ Superstar* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xp7ZLr4Rqil).

See the [Music Teacher resource](#) devoted to *Hamilton* for more information and activities based around the musical.
