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by Simon Rushby

INTRODUCTION

Students studying AoS4 of AQA's music AS and A level qualifications need to understand the style, context and music of **musicals** by five named composers – Kurt Weill, Richard Rodgers, Stephen Sondheim, Claude-Michel Schönberg and Jason Robert Brown – which span a period from roughly 1925 to the present day. All these composers took inspiration from traditional and contemporary opera and non-musical theatre, and contributed massively to the development of what is very much a 20th- and 21st-century genre, either working alone or in collaboration with other writers and lyricists.

In this first part of a two-part resource, we'll look at the contributions to the genre of the two earliest composers named by AQA, and the only two no longer living – Kurt Weill and Richard Rodgers.

First, let's recap the requirements of the AQA Appraising component.

AQA's Appraising Exam

Worth 40% of the total marks, **Appraising** is assessed in the form of an exam paper with three sections: Listening, Analysis and Essay.

There are six **Areas of Study** (AoS) at AS level, and seven at A level. AoS1 (Western Classical Tradition 1650-1910) is compulsory for all students, and they must answer questions on **one** of the other six for AS, and **two** for A level. The format of the summer exam looks like this:

AS LEVEL

Section A (Listening)	One set of questions on AoS1, and another set of questions on their chosen AoS. A 'set' of questions comprises listening questions on four excerpts of unfamiliar music by the artists specified by AQA, and one of these questions will require an extended answer.
Section B (Analysis)	Focused entirely on AoS1 and comprising one set of linked questions about an extract from one of the set works in that Area of Study. In this section students will be able to choose which of the two 'strands' to answer questions on.
Section C (Essay)	One essay question on a selected AoS.

A LEVEL

Section A (Listening)	One set of questions on AoS1, and two other sets of questions on their chosen AoSs. A 'set' of questions comprises listening questions on three excerpts of unfamiliar music by the artists/composers specified by AQA, and one of these questions will require an extended answer.
Section B (Analysis)	Focused entirely on AoS1 and comprising two sets of linked questions about two extracts from the set works in that Area of Study. In this section students will be able to choose which two of the three 'strands' to answer questions on.
Section C (Essay)	One essay question on a selected AoS.

MUSICAL THEATRE – AN OVERVIEW

The two most famous and important centres for the development of musical theatre are New York's **Broadway** and London's **West End**, but musicals have toured, played in many major cities, and been performed by amateur companies for well over 70 years.

Normally, a musical will include drama, songs, incidental music and underscore, dance and dialogue, but some musicals are **through-composed**, meaning that they have constant music including dialogue in the form of **recitative**. Musical theatre productions are not just about the singing, dancing and acting, however – the addition of design, special effects and the sense of involvement for the audience in the form of an emotionally appealing plot are just as important.

Any study of musical theatre should be prefaced by some understanding of related terminology. The music and words are known as the **score**, and the story and plot is called the **book**. Musical productions will be led by a **director** and a **musical director**, and there will also be a **choreographer** and set, costume, lighting and sound **designers**. The director will have the overall creative responsibility, but **producers**, who finance the production, will probably have quite a lot of 'say' in what goes on as well.

Musical theatre is not just a phenomenon of the last century, of course. Music has played an important part in popular theatre since ancient times, and musicals as we know them probably first saw light as parodies of the more 'serious' operatic tradition, such as *The Beggar's Opera* of the 18th century which poked fun at opera, and which was reimaged by Kurt Weill in the early 20th century, as we shall see later.

The modern musical as we know it followed on from **operetta**, **music hall**, **vaudeville** and **burlesque**, all of which were popular in America and Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, thanks to composers like Gilbert and Sullivan. The model that evolved in these productions was one of singing, dancing and acting out a story which would appeal to the 'common person', and if a little satire and comedy could be included, so much the better.

However, these popular musical productions still owe a lot to their more highbrow cousin, opera. Musicals are basically operas in many aspects, since they are structured and conceived in the same way, and operas such as Mozart's *The Magic Flute* would have been viewed as musicals if they had been written in modern times. Indeed, some composers, such as George Gershwin and Leonard Bernstein, have successfully written in both genres, and the difference between musicals and operas has always been blurred. One convenient way of differentiating between them is to consider musicals to use contemporary jazz or pop styles, and operas to be more 'classical' in design.

It was in America that musical theatre developed first, in the 1920s and 1930s, thanks to George and Ira Gershwin, Jerome Kern and Cole Porter, among others. Richard Rodgers, first collaborating with Lorenz Hart and then with Oscar Hammerstein II, took up the mantle in the 1940s and 1950s, and with the fast-growing popularity of film, many musicals (such as *The Wizard of Oz* in 1939) were made into movies. Indeed, Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg won an Oscar for 'Somewhere over the Rainbow', which was famously nearly cut from the final version of *The Wizard of Oz*.

In the 1940s, Rodgers and Hammerstein were the kings of Broadway with shows such as *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, and continued into the 1950s with *South Pacific*, *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*, which won the coveted best picture Oscar when it was made into a movie. Other musicals such as *My Fair Lady* (Lerner and Loewe) and *West Side Story* (Bernstein and Sondheim) also became highly successful films, and owed their success not only to their fantastic music and stories, but also to their groundbreaking design, choreography and stellar performances from leading actors.

The 1950s and 1960s saw a huge increase in the popularity of rock and pop music on the radio and television, and these new, modern sounds quickly found their way into musicals of the time, such as *Hair*, *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the latter being written by the new and hugely successful English partnership of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. Meanwhile, many composers strove to keep the 'integrity' of musical theatre by writing challenging, original scores that could compete with the relentless march of pop music, and Stephen Sondheim led the way in America in the 1970s while Lloyd Webber and Rice continued their success on this side of the Atlantic. Some rock bands fought back and became ultra-theatrical in their performances: *Tommy* was an actual 'rock opera' written by Pete Townshend of rock band The Who.

'Traditional' musicals that stayed away from the influence of rock and pop were still written in the 1960s and 1970s – such as *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Cabaret* and *Chicago*, and in the late 1970s and early 1980s the genre was further strengthened with the success of some of the best-known musicals ever written, often on dark, dramatic subjects, such as Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* and Schönberg and Boublil's *Les misérables*. Lloyd Webber parted company with Rice but continued to write hugely successful musicals in the 1980s such as *Cats*, *Starlight Express* and *The Phantom of the Opera*.

In the 1990s, Disney branched into theatre and with their considerable financial clout were able to produce stage versions of some of their most popular films, such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* (the latter with songs by Elton John and Tim Rice), as well as *Aladdin* more recently. Smaller-scale, more 'arty' productions appeared as well, such as *Blood Brothers*, *Little Shop of Horrors* (written by Alan Menken who was subsequently recruited by Disney) and *Rent*, a modernised version of the opera *La bohème*.

Shows like *Rent* spurred other composers to write more 'modern' musicals such as *Avenue Q*, *Spring Awakening* and Jason Robert Brown's *Songs for a New World*, and in the last two years *Hamilton* has included hip-hop influences and is currently taking Broadway and the West End by storm. A nod should also be given to the very popular genre of 'jukebox musicals', where the back catalogue of a pop singer or band is dramatised and turned into a show. *Mamma Mia* (Abba), *We Will Rock You* (Queen), *Jersey Boys* (The Four Seasons) and *Beautiful* (Carole King) are probably the most successful examples of this form.

BORROWING FROM OPERA

A short but interesting journey through some of the great moments from 20th- and 21st-century musical theatre reveals just how close to opera the genre is, particularly in the way that musicals are structured. Try one or more of the following comparisons to help students understand this link better.

COMPARISON: RECITATIVE AND ARIA

- Mozart: 'Deh vieni, non tardar' from *The Marriage of Figaro*
- Schönberg/Boublil: 'On My Own' from *Les misérables*

Mozart's beautiful aria, from Act 4 of his opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, is sung by Susanna as a tender love song to her intended, Figaro, who is hiding within earshot. Figaro is consumed by jealousy as he thinks she's singing it to the Count, with whom he worries that Susanna is having an affair. It starts with a **recitative**, where Susanna's words are sung in speech rhythm, punctuated by small melodic phrases and accompanied either by held chords or rests by the orchestra. Eponine's impassioned solo about her unrequited love for Marius in *Les misérables* comes close to the start of Act 2, shortly before Marius and his fellow students go into battle on the Parisian barricades. Her recitative is sung with rambling, incessant rhythmic phrases as she babbles uncontrollably ('And now I'm all alone again, nowhere to turn, no one to go to'). Both arias are more controlled and lyrical than their recitatives, with simple accompaniments – chordal in the Mozart and using broken chords in the Schönberg.

COMPARISON: SOLO WITH CHORUS

- Verdi: 'Brindisi' from *La traviata*
- Lionel Bart: 'Consider Yourself' from *Oliver!*

Verdi's drinking song 'Brindisi' comes from *La traviata* and follows the popular form of a solo (in this case two solos) first punctuated and then taken over by a chorus. A similar format can be found in 'Consider Yourself' from Lionel Bart's musical *Oliver!* where the Artful Dodger welcomes Oliver to London and assures him that he is among friends. Both examples have the intention to communicate the party atmosphere and be uplifting, but in musical theatre these kinds of numbers became huge production affairs with choreography and clever staging. Similar numbers from other shows are 'June is bustin' out all over' from *Carousel* and 'America' from *West Side Story*.

COMPARISON: CHARACTER SONGS

- Mozart: 'Madamina, il catalogo è questo' (Catalogue aria) from *Don Giovanni*
- Mozart: 'Der Hölle Rache' (Queen of the Night's aria) from *The Magic Flute*
- Mel Brooks: 'The King of Broadway' from *The Producers*

(NB: the third example has a swear-word in it but it is bleeped out.)

This kind of number is common in all opera and musical theatre. Often early on in the production, key characters have a song that serves to educate the audience about them, sometimes known in musicals as 'I am' songs. The 'Catalogue aria' from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is sung by his servant Leporello to one of the Don's potential girlfriends, and in it he gives her the shocking news that she is just the latest in a long line of lovers from all over Europe. A different kind of character aria from Mozart is the Queen of the Night's famous aria from *The Magic Flute*, where she unwittingly betrays her inner demons thanks to some inspired music (allegedly inspired by the composer's mother-in-law, if you believe the film *Amadeus!*). In Mel Brooks's 'The King of Broadway' from *The Producers*, theatrical impresario Max Bialystock reminisces about his past successes, helped by associated vagrants in the street.

COMPARISON: DUET

- Puccini: 'O soave fanciulla' from *La bohème*
- Schönberg/Boublil: 'The Last Night of the World' from *Miss Saigon*

Of course, by far the majority of operas and musicals have love stories at their centre, and both Puccini's operas *La bohème* and *Madama Butterfly* are tragic love stories that were 'converted' into musicals – *Rent* by Jonathan Larson, and *Miss Saigon* by Schönberg and Boublil respectively. These two love duets are good for comparison as they explore relationships in their early, heady stages before tragic events take hold and shape the course of the action. The latter is preceded by a short recitative, and the most observant students might recognise Lea Salonga from the *Les misérables* example above, who also voiced Princess Jasmine in the Disney film *Aladdin*.

KURT WEILL

German composer Kurt Weill (1900-50) studied composition in Berlin with leading composers of the early 20th century including Busoni and Humperdinck, and in his 20s established a reputation as an experimental opera composer. This brought him into contact with the poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht, and the two men shared a strong aversion to the political and social situation in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s – Weill was Jewish and Brecht had strong Marxist beliefs.

Weill and Brecht's first collaboration was a **singspiel** (an opera with spoken dialogue) called *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in 1929, which was set in a fictional American town and combined Wild West legends with the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Politically it was a strong critique of German capitalism, and its early performances were often disrupted by protests by Nazi sympathisers. The two men also wrote *The Threepenny Opera*, a re-working of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* of 1728, transposed to the underworld of Victorian London – a theme that emerged again, this time transposed to Berlin, in Kander and Ebb's 1966 musical *Cabaret*.

Both operas were huge successes and considered masterpieces, particularly for the way that Weill incorporated American **jazz** and **ragtime** styles into the often **discordant** music. They were also hugely controversial, as were Brecht and Weill's subsequent operas of the early 1930s, and both men needed to leave Germany as the Nazis rose to power. Weill's music was banned in Germany as 'degenerate' until after the Second World War, and he eventually settled in New York.

For more than ten years in New York, Weill continued to write operas and music for plays, and it was his lighter comedic and **folk operas** – almost seen as musicals – that attracted the most popularity. He even worked with Ira Gershwin. Two of his best-known songs are 'Mack the Knife' from *The Threepenny Opera* and 'September Song' from *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938).

Mack the Knife

In German the name for this song, 'Die Moritat von Mackie Messer', 'Moritat' means 'murder ballad'. It is a character song for the leading man in *The Threepenny Opera*, Macheath (or 'Mackie'), a serial murderer and womaniser. The song was written as a prologue to Act 1 of the opera, and became a popular song in its own right when *The Threepenny Opera* opened in New York in the 1950s.

Popular jazz artist Louis Armstrong was the first to release a (slightly watered-down) version of it, and in 1959 singer Bobby Darin made it into the swing classic it's best known as today. It was also covered by Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, Ella Fitzgerald and others, but the original, accompanied by a barrel-organ and in German folk-style, is very different to the version most of us are used to.

COMPARISON EXERCISE

Get your students to compare these two versions to illustrate how the song changed when – ironically, considering the left-wing satire of *The Threepenny Opera* – it became such a huge commercial success.

- Version 1: Sung by Lotte Lenya (Kurt Weill's wife, who played the female lead part in many of the early productions of *The Threepenny Opera*).
- Version 2: sung by Louis Armstrong and Lotte Lenya.

September Song

This song first appeared in the Broadway musical *Knickerbocker Holiday*, which Weill wrote with playwright Maxwell Anderson, though as a 'standard' it found more fame after its use in a 1950 film called *September Affair*. The musical was moderately successful, running for six months, since political satire was not always welcomed on the Broadway stage and, like other Weill works, this piece criticised the allegedly more corrupt aspects of President Roosevelt's New Deal programme.

'September Song' was recorded by a number of leading singers of the time, most famously Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, who both recorded it in the 1940s. Though it is sung from the perspective of an old man reminiscing about his youth, there are also many versions by female singers, including Ella Fitzgerald and Lotte Lenya. Like 'Mack the Knife', the 'standard' version of the song has become quite different to the Weill original, particularly in terms of its lyrics.

LISTENING EXERCISE

Listen to the first two minutes of *September Song*, performed by Frank Sinatra in 1946 [here](#).

Answer the following questions:

1. What is the tonality of the excerpt?
2. What type of voice sings the excerpt?
3. Describe the use of the harp throughout the excerpt.
4. Describe how the instruments bring out the meaning of the words 'And the Autumn weather turns the leaves to flame'.
5. Outline the structure of the excerpt.

Suggested answers:

1. Major.
2. Baritone.
3. It adds colour with spread chords throughout, and adds a little rhythm (along with pizzicato double basses) with off-beat high notes in the B section.
4. Tremolo violins and upper woodwind trills, along with use of crescendo and diminuendo.
5. AABA – a common structure for songs in musicals and jazz standards. Each section is the same length.

Students may wish to compare this with the more familiar Sinatra version of 1965, [here](#).

RICHARD RODGERS

Rodgers was born in New York in 1902 and died there in 1979 after a long, hugely successful career working chiefly with lyricists Lorenz (or Larry) Hart (until Hart's death in 1943) and Oscar Hammerstein II. He studied at Columbia University and met Hart while still a teenager. Their early efforts at writing shows were not successful, and Rodgers nearly gave it all up to become an underwear salesman. But everything changed when the pair were asked to contribute songs to a revue that eventually became *The Garrick Gaieties* – one song in particular, 'Manhattan' (1925), was a hit, and Rodgers's songwriting career was born.

Rodgers and Hart went on to write music and lyrics for 26 Broadway shows, spawning well-known songs such as 'Blue Moon' (1934), 'My Funny Valentine' (1937) and 'Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered' (1940). Hart's failing health in the early 1940s led Rodgers to work with another lyricist, Oscar Hammerstein II, and their first show was *Oklahoma!*, written in 1943. Rodgers himself said that his music changed when he started to work with Hammerstein: 'Larry (Hart) was inclined to be cynical. Oscar was more sentimental, and so the music had to be more sentimental. It wouldn't have been natural for Larry to write *Oklahoma!* any more than it would have been natural for Oscar to write *Pal Joey*.'

Oklahoma! was a massive hit, with songs such as 'Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'' and 'People Will Say We're in Love'. The creative pair quickly formed their own publishing company to ensure that they could control their copyright and act as producers for many of their shows, and using plays and novels as their main sources they continued to write blockbusters – *Carousel* in 1945 included the haunting ballad 'If I Loved You' and the famous anthem 'You'll Never Walk Alone', and *The King and I* in 1951 included 'Getting to Know You' and 'Hello, Young Lovers'.

All three of these musicals were turned into successful Hollywood films, as were *South Pacific* (1949) and *The Sound of Music* (1959) which won best picture, best director, best music and two other Oscars at the 1965 Academy Awards. Julie Andrews in the lead role of Maria was nominated for an Oscar, but did not win. Songs from these enduring shows include 'Some Enchanted Evening', 'Happy Talk', 'My Favourite Things', 'Do-Re-Mi' and 'Sixteen Going On Seventeen'.

After Hammerstein's death in 1960, Rodgers went on to work with a number of other leading composers and lyricists, including Stephen Sondheim, and he became the first person to win all five of the performing arts' most prestigious awards – Tony, Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Pulitzer Prize. Now there are awards, buildings, schools and even a Broadway theatre named after him. There have been 19 film versions made of his musicals, and he wrote and published over 1000 songs, nearly 100 of which are considered 'standards' in the musical theatre and popular repertoire.

'What's the Use of Wond'rin'?' from *Carousel*

This sweet song is sung early in Act II by Julie Jordan, the wife of Carousel barker Billy Bigelow, who is pregnant with his child but quietly unhappy and uncertain about their future. Billy has fallen in with criminals and gets embroiled in a plot to rob a rich man – a plot doomed to failure – but Julie knows nothing of his plan and is simply worried about his preoccupied character. The song is a brave response by her to the local girls who are trying to get her to tell them how she's feeling.

MELODIC ANALYSIS

'What's the Use of Wond'rin'?' is an excellent example of Rodgers's ability to communicate not only the feelings of a character but also their personality and inner strength through a simple song. This is partly achieved through Hammerstein's poignant and thoughtful lyric – follow this, the second verse, and listen here (from 0:35).

Common sense may tell you that the ending will be sad

And now's the time to break and run away

But what's the use of wond'rin' if the ending will be sad

He's your fella and you love him – there's nothing more to say.

There's a lot to learn from studying Rodgers's setting of these insightful lyrics, particularly in his melodic writing. Get your students to note the characteristics of the melody for this verse. Here are some of the things they may come up with:

- The first line has a **descending conjunct** melody, a **falling 6th** and then a **rising conjunct** melody.
- The second line continues to rise in step.
- The third line reaches the highest note **chromatically** and then falls with another interval of a 6th.
- Towards the end of the third line there are two **apoggiaturas** that add to the emotional impact.
- The final line rises by step again, but falls away this time into a **cadence**, almost in a resigned way (to match the words).
- **Dotted rhythms** are a key feature of the melody, and there are **syncopations** on 'wond'rin'', 'fella', 'love him' and 'nothing'.
- **Long notes** are used for important words: 'away', 'him', 'say'.

'My Favourite Things' from *The Sound of Music*

This song is sung by Maria and is a list of the things she thinks about when feeling sad or frightened. In the original 1959 stage production the song was placed quite early in the story, when Maria was still a nun at the Abbey and was considering the prospect of being sent away to act as governess to the seven children of

Captain von Trapp. However in the film of 1965 (in which Julie Andrews played Maria) the song is moved to a later scene, where Maria is comforting the children during a thunderstorm.

'My Favourite Things' has become a 'standard', and has been covered by a large number of notable artists. Jazz saxophonist John Coltrane recorded an extremely famous version in 1961 on his album of the same title, and it became a hit. You can hear that version here, if your students would like to compare it.

LISTENING EXERCISE

Start by watching the film version of this song, which can be found here.

Then use this version, sung by Sarah Vaughan in 1961, to answer the following questions:

1. Name the two instruments accompanying the singer.
2. Compare the tonality at the beginning of the excerpt with the tonality at the end (at 1:21).
3. Describe the music played by the accompanying instrument at the start of the excerpt.
4. Complete the melody of the opening phrase, below:

Rain - drops on ro - ses and whis - kers on kitens,___

5. Name the cadence at 0:38, which is the end of the first verse (accompanying the words 'my favourite things').

Answers:

1. Electric guitar and pizzicato double bass.
2. It is minor at the start and major at the end. The vocal melody initially uses just the 1st, 2nd and 5th degrees, which allows both major and minor tonic chords to work in the harmony.
3. The guitar plays chords made up of the notes sung by the singer, as descending 'spread' chords. It plays in a waltz-style, emphasising the triple metre. On the first beat it plays the dominant note, not the tonic, creating a kind of dominant pedal.

4.

Rain - drops on ro - ses and whis - kers on kit- tens,___

5. Imperfect cadence.

In part 2 of this resource, we will look at the music of Stephen Sondheim, Claude-Michel Schönberg and Jason Robert Brown.