



## Celebrating Sondheim

Saturday, January 18, 2020

Program notes by Dr. Mary Jane Ayers

The beginning of the “Golden Age” of the American musical is often dated 1943, when Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* premiered on Broadway. Argument can be made that it ended in 1960,\* with the death of Oscar Hammerstein II. What does that have to do with Stephen Sondheim? Almost everything: Sondheim grew up in the Golden Age, had a solid mentorship with Rodgers and Hammerstein, engaged with every show he could, and then became one of the people who moved the American musical into a very different, more complex and innovative era. This concert takes the audience from the beginnings—*The Frogs!* to *Sunday in the Park with George*—a long, musically adventurous journey through some of the greatest and most inventive music, words, and characters ever imagined for the stage.

Stephen Joshua Sondheim was born on March 22, 1930. The composer’s first ten years were spent on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. He saw his first Broadway show, *Very Warm for May*, at age nine. He later recalled, “The curtain went up and revealed a piano. A butler took a duster and brushed it, tinkling the keys. I thought that was thrilling.” The next year his parents divorced, his mother got legal custody of young Stephen, and the two of them moved to a farm near Doylestown, in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

Unfortunately, Sondheim’s mother was an extremely difficult and emotionally abusive woman. She once wrote him a letter saying that the “only regret [she] ever had was giving him birth.” However, out of his misery came an opportunity that shaped his future. Living at the farm next door in Bucks County was Oscar Hammerstein and his family. Sondheim and Oscar’s son James became friends, and Oscar Hammerstein gradually took on the role of surrogate father, profoundly influencing the young Sondheim’s personal life and his professional goals.

Sondheim wrote his first musical, cleverly titled, *By George*, at the George School, a private Quaker boarding and day high school young Stephen attended in Bucks County. It was such a success at school that he took to Hammerstein to evaluate, imagining the wonderful complements he would receive. Hammerstein said it was the worst thing he’d ever seen, then continued, “But if you want to know why it’s terrible, I’ll tell you.” According to Sondheim, “In that afternoon I learned more about songwriting and the musical theater than most people learn in a lifetime.” When he was little older, Sondheim

became an assistant to Rodgers and Hammerstein, which gave him the extraordinary opportunity to work backstage, learning the inner workings of Broadway shows during rehearsals and productions. At the opening of *South Pacific*, Sondheim met director Hal Prince, with whom he would later collaborate for over ten years.

In addition to immediate feedback on his work, Hammerstein designed a huge project that would take Sondheim four years to complete—he finished at age 22. Hammerstein challenged Sondheim to write four separate musicals for his critique, each with one of the following conditions:

- Based on a play he admired (which became *All That Glitters*)
- Based on a play he liked but thought flawed; Sondheim chose Maxwell Anderson's *High Tor*
- Based on an existing novel or short story not previously dramatized, which became his unfinished version of *Mary Poppins* (titled *Bad Tuesday*) unrelated to the musical film and stage play scored by the Sherman Brothers
- An original, which became *Climb High*

None of these musicals were professionally produced, but what Sondheim learned in the process could not have been acquired elsewhere.

During his schooling at Williams College, Sondheim travelled to NYC for weekly 4-hour sessions with master classical composer Milton Babbitt, who was “a frustrated show composer.” According to Sondheim, they spent the first hour dissecting Rodgers and Hart or George Gershwin (or others). They then proceeded to other forms of music (such as Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony*), critiquing them the same way. He said about Babbitt, “I am his maverick, his one student who went into the popular arts with all his serious artillery”.

After several years of disappointments and near misses, Sondheim ran into playwright Arthur Laurents at a party. Laurents told him he was working on a musical version of *Romeo and Juliet* with Leonard Bernstein, but they needed a lyricist. He suggested Sondheim audition for Leonard Bernstein, and Sondheim became the lyricist for *West Side Story*. At the time of the premiere in 1957, Bernstein was age 39, Hal Prince was 29, choreographer Jerome Robbins was 38, and Sondheim was the baby of the group at 27. The initial run of *West Side Story* was 732 performances, followed by the 1961 film, world tours, and many other revivals, one of which is currently running on Broadway. After the premiere, Sondheim wrote to Bernstein, “May *West Side Story* mean as much to the theater and to people who see it as it has to us.”

And so, Stephen Sondheim was launched into the world of Broadway, and from then on, he did it his way! His subject matter was often controversial, and his music misunderstood. But the Golden Age was over—the Age of Innocence was gone. The ‘60’s and ‘70’s were fueled by the reality check of the Civil Rights Movement, Anti-war protests, the Women’s Movement, and huge changes in popular music. Rock and Roll (and country, and R & B, and Folk music) was definitely here to stay. America changed and the theater (usually reflective of current culture) had to change with it.

From *The Secret Life of the American Musical*, by Jack Viertel: “Broadway became something of a musical backwater. It certainly wasn’t a place Lennon and McCartney, Carole King, Paul Simon, or Billy Joel thought about first...the most remarkable shift that occurred in the decade that followed was caused by a set of startlingly innovative musicals produced and directed by Harold Prince and written by

Stephen Sondheim.... After *Company* (1970), the team produced *Follies* (1971), which had the temerity to ask what happens when your dreams don't come true, when you wake up to realize that they never could have come true—that you weren't who you thought you were. *Follies* was emblematic of the America that had been rudely awakened from the dreams fostered by *Oklahoma!* and its descendants...it was quickly clear that Sondheim's musicals had changed the form and content rules forever...but no matter how wild and unbridled their shows became, they were operating from a deep understanding of where the form had been and how it had succeeded."

His best-known works as composer and lyricist include *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), *Into the Woods* (1987), *Assassins* (1990), and *Passion* (1994). In addition to the lyrics for *West Side Story* (1957), he wrote lyrics for *Gypsy* (1959), and *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (1965). There was also a funny little musical called *The Frogs* (1974), based on a comedy by Aristophanes written IN 405 BC, that you probably never heard of. *The Frogs* has one of the best beginnings of any musical—in this concert, you, the audience, will be instructed on how to behave. In this concert, you will mind your P's & Q's!

Sondheim's film music includes five songs for 1990's *Dick Tracy*, including "Sooner or Later (I Always Get My Man)", sung in the film by Madonna, which won the Academy Award for Best Original Song. Other awards? Sure! an Academy Award, eight Tony Awards (more than any other composer, including a Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre), eight Grammy Awards, a Pulitzer Prize, a Laurence Olivier Award, the Kennedy Center Honor, and a 2015 Presidential Medal of Freedom. He was described by theater critic Frank Rich of *The New York Times* as "now the greatest and perhaps best-known artist in the American musical theater."

In the last thirty years, Sondheim has served as a mentor to several young composers, including Jonathan Larson (*Rent – 1996 – a tour company will be on the road in February 2020*) and Lin-Manuel Miranda (*Hamilton – 2015*), passing the baton so meaningfully offered to him by Oscar Hammerstein. Shortly before Hammerstein's death in 1960, Sondheim hesitantly asked his mentor and surrogate father to sign a picture. Hammerstein did so, including a quote from Anna, the teacher in *The King and I*. The engraving reads, "To Stephen, my friend and teacher – 'By your pupils you are taught.'"

\*Some sources date the Golden Age of musical theater to 1940 with the premiere of *Pal Joey* (a decidedly uncheerful story musical), and end it in 1968 when *Hair* premiered, using popular music styles and a socially conscious anti-war theme. Others date the close of the Golden Age as late as 1973.