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The American Musical as an Honors Course: Obstacles and Possibilities

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Music courses are often problematic for the general undergraduate student as they focus on abstract concepts, employ a specialized vocabulary, and examine compositions not part of most people's everyday listening repertoire. Many will acknowledge that while they enjoy listening to music, their background and experiences are limited and steeped in the familiar. Appreciation is based on personal taste and often fails to consider historical context, structural components, and stylistic trends. Despite these obstacles, it is possible to construct a meaningful and challenging course for students, regardless of their major, as long as one is willing to use music not as an object for analysis but as a lens through which other topics are viewed, studied, and examined. Such an approach lends itself especially well to a discussion-based class and, in particular, an honors seminar.

How does one create a class that seriously considers some aspect of music when a majority of the participants have little or no prior background in the subject? The trick is to identify a genre that is accessible to students on first hearing and allows them to work with the medium in a critical manner. The American musical provides an attractive possibility because it is familiar enough that most students are not immediately discouraged by "new" or different sounds, the subject matter is sufficiently varied for extensive discussion, and the genre is one with which nearly all have had at least some personal experience. This article explains my positive experience teaching an honors seminar focused on this popular genre.

I began the planning process acknowledging that those enrolled in the course would have little or no background in music theory and/or history and would be able neither to examine a composition using traditional means of analysis (harmonic, thematic, rhythmic, structural, etc.) nor draw on any historical perspective. How then could I get them to consider a musical beyond something that is fun and entertaining (*a la* Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *That's Entertainment*)? One approach was to start by examining the texts, both the original sources (plays, short stories, or novels) and the resultant libretti. Not only would this approach provide an *entrée* for those students who might initially have problems getting beyond the "basic plot," but it also offered

opportunities for comparison between the initial work and its transformation into a play set to music.

While students could thus begin looking at a work via the text, they still needed assistance in developing other skills: how to listen, analyze, and evaluate. In particular, their aural skills would require attention. Learning to think about the quality of sound, the relationship between various parts, the interplay between lines, and the function of the orchestra required a realignment of the students' standard practice of listening, which generally consisted of focusing almost exclusively on the lyrics and vocal parts. I have often found that non-musicians label lyrics as "the music" with everything else relegated to "the instruments." I needed to train the students to become aural learners. Previous classroom experiences revealed that many students listened passively; when a visual component was added, their passivity became even more pronounced. In those situations, music was peripheral to costuming, movement, and spoken text. As a countermeasure, I determined that listening to a musical's sound track would necessarily have to come prior to viewing a performance.

Constructing a methodology for analysis was also a challenge. While students traditionally developed insight into characters, relationships, motifs, moods, and emotions through a careful reading of the text, I expected them to gain the same information through active listening to music and close observation of choreographed movements. They would have to examine a work with respect to structure, texture, function of vocal and dance numbers, quality of sound and movement, and vocal and dance style. Understanding these components would provide a framework for assessment of representative pieces rather than an evaluation based on a personal likes and dislikes.

I divided the seminar into different sections, each focusing on a theme: viewing the musical as entertainment and social commentary (*Kiss Me, Kate*; *My Fair Lady*), establishing an American identity (*Oklahoma!*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Carousel*), considering ethnic issues (*Show Boat*, *West Side Story*, *Cabaret*), and entering the world of Stephen Sondheim (*A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd*). Each student, assigned a particular composition, would be responsible for leading a discussion of the texts connected with his or her musical. Students examined both the original piece of literature and the musical libretto, considering the transformation of the former to the latter. Furthermore, they were required to investigate character types, central themes, symbolic references, and subplots; to explore how these varied from one medium to the other; and lastly, to examine the role and placement of songs and dances. I met with each student prior to his or her session; this was an opportunity for the student to try out ideas, ask for suggestions, or clear up any confusion. Knowing the potential direction of the class discussion allowed me to tailor my remarks so that I could supplement what was being presented that day. The "class agreement" was that, after the student-led discussion, I would guide the class through some of the technical aspects for which they possessed neither training nor knowledge.

Our introductory session considered the musical in its most abstract sense. Did one view the genre as an art form or simply as entertainment? If the former,

how did one determine value in a work of art, and what criteria might one use to judge it? We talked about why texts were set to music. What were the effects of such settings, and which ones were most successful? From here we considered the role of dance. Was it possible for dance to take the place of dialogue? Were there times when dance might be a more effective conveyor of emotion and drama than either spoken text or lyrics? Why did musicals move us, and how? My goal was for the students to think about these pieces not just as a source of entertainment but also as a means of communication, perhaps even a form of persuasion. Did these works confirm belief systems, did they offer new modes of thinking, or did they challenge us to confront fears and insecurities?

The following week was devoted to a consideration of the musical within an historical context. I provided students with a chronological overview of the genre, moving from its early history up to the 1980s, highlighting its various components and features. Examples from representative musicals provided concrete illustrations of the various approaches to structure, subject matter, song, dance, and the like over the course of slightly less than a hundred years. During this section, I stopped periodically and asked, "What is a musical?" This question initially confused the students because their first reaction was simply to say that it was a "text set to music with some dance." The notion of the musical as a reflection of American attitudes and values did not readily come to mind. By the end of the session, however, students easily thought about the genre in terms of social issues, the role of song and dance, stage presentation, quality of sound, and types of characters.

As an introductory exercise, each student was asked to read the libretto to Cole Porter's *Kiss Me, Kate* and make predictions about it in light of the historical overview provided. My institution treats all honors courses as writing intensive. Rather than one long paper, I chose to have students fulfill this requirement through both short responses and a larger project of moderate length. The first assignment was to write a brief paper of two or three pages about *Kiss Me, Kate* describing the sound and style of music, presentation and development of characters, and placement and function of song. This assignment set the pattern for the weeks to come. Students came to understand that a particular musical would be a point of departure from which to consider a specific idea, issue, or concept and to write about it in a critical manner.

Kiss Me, Kate, as an initial activity, was treated in workshop fashion, allowing students to develop ideas about how they might approach their own presentations of assigned musicals. We began with a discussion of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew,* focusing primarily on major themes and character types. Turning to Porter's work, I asked the students to determine how much of it came from Shakespeare's. We discussed the notion of a play-within-a-play, one of the more obvious similarities. Students considered how the backstage ("American/Baltimore") and on-stage ("*Shrew*") parts of the musical were differentiated. Initially they separated the two parts based on plot with little thought given to how music, lyrics, and dance helped situate the two into

Shakespearean and modern-day settings. To illustrate, I asked the students to consider the function of "Too Darn Hot," the song-dance sequence which opens the second act. Their immediate response was that it was simply "fun" and had little to do with the musical itself. Asked to outline characteristics of this segment, they identified the big-band jazz sound, casual interaction between the sexes, manner of speech, topical references in the lyrics (i.e., the Kinsey Report), and style of dance. With assistance, students understood that they were describing 1940s America. In contrast, a musical sound reminiscent of the Renaissance period, a more formalized mode of interaction (both style of speech and social roles), inclusion of courtly dances, and choice of subject matter distinguished the "*Shrew*" portions. Students thus began to take into account quality of sound, song types, instrumental music, and dance sequences as a means to separate the two, both visually and aurally.

While plot parallels could be determined for the on-stage setting, it was also important to note how the themes of *Taming of the Shrew* showed up throughout *Kiss Me, Kate*, in both the "American/Baltimore" and "*Shrew*" segments. The notion of mistaken identity, for example, could easily be found in both works, although not necessarily in identical fashions. Courtship types also served as a useful means of comparison. Students came to realize that the portions of *Kiss Me, Kate* directly connected to *Taming of the Shrew* via text and plot were not the only places where the Shakespearean play presented itself. For the following week, students were given the assignment of determining where and how *Kiss Me, Kate* referred to the *Taming of the Shrew*: on-stage, backstage, or both.

The next four sessions featured student-led discussions on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*/Alan Lerner's *My Fair Lady*, Lynn Rigg's *Green Grow the Lilacs*/Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, two short stories by Damon Runyon/Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls*, and Ferenc Molnar's *Lilliom*/Rogers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*. Each presenter spent time with me before class trying out ideas, mapping out points to discuss, and in general looking at how a play or story changed when set to music. Equipped with texts, sound tracks, and videos, the class then explored each of these works from the perspective of the individual characters, the rationale for change of plots/events, the role of dance, the effectiveness of music/song, and the like. Writing assignments encouraged students to think about whether *Kiss Me, Kate* and *My Fair Lady* were merely entertaining pieces or vehicles for conveying larger social issues; to consider the role and function of dance in *Oklahoma!*; and to explore the concept of the idealized America in *Oklahoma!* and *Guys and Dolls*. In each circumstance, students received extensive feedback from me. Not only did I examine their writings for persuasiveness and clarity, but I also posed questions that suggested further avenues of exploration. I often asked students to consider an alternative interpretation of actions and lyrics, to entertain the idea that a character or scene could serve as a metaphor for a larger issue, or to evaluate the connection (or lack thereof) between some song or

dance and the drama. While I knew that a short response paper was not the place to explore these questions fully, I wanted to offer my writers ideas for their larger papers or simply a different way of thinking that might be helpful in future assignments.

These papers, then, became a dialogue between teacher and student. I asked each person to clarify his or her thoughts, to provide further support, and to consider other possibilities. I invited my writers to reflect upon alternative ideas, not as a corrective measure but as an encouragement to think critically about the compositions. The goal was to promote a deeper examination of the works in question and to apply the same techniques to other compositions as well. Over the course of the semester, students revealed a gradual acceptance of the premise that while a musical functioned in one sense as a source of entertainment, on another level it served as a form of communication, one in which the creators used an accessible art form to offer a viewpoint or idea. For the students, the task was to discover how it was done, determine its effectiveness, and identify the means by which it was or was not achieved.

Halfway through the semester, students knew to expect more than a story with song and dance. They looked for a second and perhaps even a third layer to uncover. They were comfortable dealing with the texts and noticing where, how, and why songs and dances were used. They had started to examine the functions of the various parts of the musicals, understanding that each component—dance, song, chorus, and text—was carefully crafted to support the entire composition. They considered the difference between a staged play and a staged musical. They learned that texts and plots were altered for specific reasons. Lyrics could not be treated in the same manner as poetry or prose works. Audiences were different, and the intent of the original author and creators of the musical was not always the same.

The next step was to reassess the musical based on what we had learned so far. I began by asking, "What is a musical? Why do we watch them? Why are they written?" They offer us a world view—whether or not it is realistic or plausible—and often present us with familiar situations, characters, ideas, goals, and hopes. Each of the musicals discussed up to that point had included the notion of "community"; students considered what this actually meant—safety net, solidarity, shared values, ominous crowd? How did text, song, and dance convey this meaning? From the five works previously examined, students selected representative songs that illustrated "community." After listening to several, we talked about the stylistic aspects. While text was an important component, students also understood that "community" was often more effectively heightened by musical means, especially through the use of voices singing in unison, as well as dances that involved nearly all the cast members moving in similar ways.

Musical style is also an ideal way to flesh out roles and personalities. Leading characters, for example, are distinguished from secondary ones by their vocal style and declamation and by the lyrical and rhythmic quality of the

melodies, even when different characters sing the same type of song (i.e., love song, comic song, and dialogue-style song). Some songs highlight a person's ideals and values while others tell us about one character's relationship with another, often in a very subtle fashion. One can listen to how the voices work together or not, if people sing in consonance or not, or if melodies return during the course of a whole musical.

As with the concept of community, students selected particular songs that supported these ideas. After listening, we made lists of characteristics. Students became comfortable identifying those qualities likely to be found in songs for leading characters, secondary characters, and large communal groups; they were also able to identify how music expressed emotion (joy, sadness, fear, frustration) not merely through lyrics but through melody, harmony, and timbre.

To reinforce these ideas and to provide an opportunity for each student to apply them, I assigned a scene from Jerome Kern's *Show Boat*. Students examined the text and then predicted how the scene would be set to music, incorporating what we had discussed about uses of sound, orchestra, chorus, vocal types, and other stylistic characteristics. The following week, we talked about their expectations and then listened to the actual scene. Interestingly, nearly all the students had begun to develop a sense of what worked from a dramatic and musical point of view; moreover, most students could verbalize why they made particular choices. A discussion of *Show Boat* provided an opportunity for each student to begin making connections with previously analyzed musicals. An assigned paper detailing the influence of that early work on later ones encouraged students to synthesize critical aspects of the musical as a genre up to the mid-1950s.

Show Boat also became the starting point to consider how composers, lyricists, and others treated ethnic issues. I once again turned the class over to the students. Although previously we had discussed the concept of the marriage trope (i.e., a successful or unsuccessful union of two characters serving as a metaphor for the resolution or non-resolution of a larger issue) in musicals such as *West Side Story* and *Cabaret*, its application became more integral to understanding underlying ethnic and/or social conflicts. The two works by Stephen Sondheim mentioned earlier formed the basis for the final portion of the semester. These last four pieces challenged the students' notion of the musical as "happy and fun." They were particularly problematic for presenters and classmates alike, primarily because of their serious nature. For example, when I asked the students whether there were instances when murder and deception could be justified, they had no immediate and definite answer. Our lively discussions often focused on a particular character's behavior, words, and motivations. Interestingly, students routinely turned to the musical numbers—both songs and dances—as a way of supporting their positions and buttressing their arguments. Thus, while initially students may have viewed songs and dances as simple entertainment, by this point in the semester those very elements had become central to understanding relationships, personalities, subtexts, and subtle points.

At the same time, students worked on their final, ten-page papers. All were required to submit a rough draft and then schedule a meeting with me. In their final, polished form, these papers demonstrated a nuanced understanding of how characters and plots symbolized concepts and issues. Topics ranged from the role of community in musicals from the 1940s to approaches to World War II to the use of dance as a replacement for text (spoken or sung) to issues of social and ethnic identity. Students successfully analyzed lyrics, dance, and music as well as structural components. Their writing revealed an appreciation of how the American musical promoted examination of human relationships, social issues, and historical and cultural events.

By the end of the semester I had answered my initial question of whether it was possible for a group of students to consider seriously a musical form that previous experience had taught them was solely for entertainment. Using the original texts and the subsequent libretti as points of departure, students learned to think critically about the genre, incorporating textual, aural, and visual analysis. For these students, the musical had come to serve as a means by which one could examine social and ethnic issues, character types, and perceptions and misperceptions. The musical, a form of communication between creator and observer, creator and student, offered material worthy of serious and critical consideration. For these students, the musical was no longer merely a form of entertainment but had become a genre that had powers of persuasion and challenged them to consider concepts and ideas in new and varied ways.

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