

“Kiss Me, Kate” (Original cast recording) (1949)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

Essay by Lynn Laitman Siebert (guest post)*



Kiss Me, Kate

No examination of Cole Porter’s contributions would be complete without an assessment of his acknowledged masterpiece, “Kiss Me, Kate.” Premiered on Broadway in 1948, and captured on the original Broadway cast album produced by Columbia in February, 1949, it holds a unique place in Porter’s career and represents the fullest flowering of his mature talent.

Porter’s enormous successes in the 1930’s were followed by setbacks in the early 1940’s. World War II changed the theatre and its audiences as it changed the world. Plagued by extreme physical pain from his damaged legs (the result of a 1937 riding accident) and by frequent professional disappointments which sapped his self-esteem, dampened his spirit, and undermined his reputation, Porter was eclipsed by newer styles and, according to his agent, was considered “old fashioned.”

Yet, it was in 1948, amid rumors he was “written out,” that Porter composed “Kiss Me, Kate,” meeting the challenge of the “new style musical comedy” and simultaneously surpassing his past triumphs while establishing a new standard for the genre. The score’s subtle refinement, depth of expression, inventiveness, and the total integration of music, lyrics and libretto distinguish “Kiss Me, Kate” as Porter’s masterwork and as one of the finest musical comedies ever written.

Arnold Saint Subber, co-producer of “Kate,” described the genesis of the work in a 1970 BBC documentary entitled “The Making of ‘Kiss Me, Kate,’” revealing that he conceived the play-within-a-play format based on “The Taming of the Shrew” after watching real-life married actors Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne bicker offstage during their production of the Shakespeare classic. Saint Subber approached Bella Spewack to write the script and she suggested Porter compose the score. After several discussions concerning the overall plan of the book, Porter wrote “Another Op’nin’, Another Show,” “I’ve Come to Wive it Wealthily in Padua,” and “Where is the Life That Late I Led?.” Bella Spewack, who co-authored the book with her husband, Sam, worked closely with Porter, often suggesting song titles from Shakespeare’s own lines and from the script, knowing that Porter usually built his songs around a striking textual

phrase. A masterful adaptation of Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew," incorporating a parallel, contemporary love story, the Spewacks' script was the only one in Porter's long career to match his talents and the resulting blend is magical.

The story portrays Fred Graham, director and leading man of a second-rate acting company and Lilli Vanessi, his ex-wife and leading lady in their upcoming performance of Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew." They are divorced, dating others but still in love with one another ("So in Love"). Their arguments, jealousies and eventual reconciliation form the basis for the plot. The secondary romantic characters are Lois Lane and Bill Calhoun, whose plans to marry are frustrated by his compulsive gambling ("Why Can't You Behave?") and her questionable fidelity ("Always True to You in My Fashion"). Both relationships are ingeniously paralleled in "The Taming of the Shrew," interweaving contemporary and Shakespearean worlds through the play-within-a-play framework. Fred/Petruchio "tames" Lilli/Kate, thus allowing Lois/Bianca to marry Bill/Lucentio. Porter's music and lyrics consistently reflect and support "Kate's" interweaving of two worlds: 20th-century America and 16th-century Padua.

With a cast of 40 (including chorus), "Kiss Me, Kate" opened on Broadway at the New Century Theatre on December 30, 1948, with 1,077 domestic and subsequent international performances. Produced by Arnold Saint Subber and Lemuel Ayres and choreographed by Hanya Holm, "Kate" starred Alfred Drake (Fred Graham/Petruchio), Patricia Morison (Lilli Vanessi/Kate), Lisa Kirk (Lois Lane/Bianca) and Harold Lang (Bill Calhoun/Lucentio). The music was orchestrated by Robert Russell Bennett. In 1949, the show won five Tony Awards: the first ever for Best Musical, and Tonys for Best Produced Show, Best Script, Best Score and Best Costumes. The 1999 Broadway revival also won five Tony Awards. The most recent testament to "Kate's" enduring popularity is the upcoming 2019 revival by New York's Roundabout Theatre starring Kelli O'Hara and Will Chase, which notes, "In the constellation of musical comedy masterpieces, 'Kiss Me, Kate' shines as perhaps Broadway's most sparkling achievement."

According to Columbia Records, the original cast album (with Alfred Drake and Patricia Morison) "was recorded at midnight sessions early in the show's run, and released on February 15, 1949, becoming Columbia Records' first original cast album available on the then-new 12-inch LP format." Instead of the more common 10" format, the new 12-inch discs allowed for more music along with bits of dialogue to introduce several songs, thus highlighting the thorough integration of the script and music in "Kate." It remained number one in the "Billboard" LP chart for 10 weeks.

This definitive recording of "Kiss Me, Kate" captures Porter's harmonic sophistication, formal/organizational inventiveness, thematic cohesion, subtle use of rhythm/meter and command of multiple styles as he precisely tailors the music to enhance and intensify the meaning of the text. Porter's music parallels his equally extraordinary literary gifts, replete with abundant alliteration, an enormous vocabulary, ingenious and often multiple "internal" rhymes, double entendres, intricate textual rhythms, elegance and sheer literary quality. Every song grows organically out of the dialogue and each, in the space of mere minutes, captures the essence of the character and/or advances the drama onstage.

For the “play-within-the-play,” the performance of Shakespeare’s “Taming of the Shrew,” Porter purposely uses Shakespeare’s own language set in a fittingly more classical, diatonic musical style (as in “I Hate Men,” “I’ve Come To Wive it Weathily In Padua,” “Were Thine That Special Face,” “Where is the Life That Late I Led?,” etc.). When portraying his characters’ contemporary lives, he skillfully utilizes more chromatic, contemporary musical idioms (as in the bluesy “Why Can’t You Behave?,” “Too Darn Hot,” or even the Bowery waltz style in “Brush Up Your Shakespeare”). Porter’s exquisite, dramatic love ballad, “So in Love,” uses the music to encapsulate the intense emotional bond between Fred and Lilli, highlighting the dramatic core and creating one of the most refined and beautifully crafted songs in the score. His rousing opener, “Another Op’nin’, Another Show,” rivals Berlin’s great show business anthem, “There’s No Business Like Show Business” (from “Annie Get Your Gun,” 1946). His concise setting of “I Hate Men” transports the audience to 16th-century Padua and conveys Kate’s stubborn, shrewish personality with remarkable economy. Similarly, Porter frames “Where is the Life That Late I Led?,” employing a classical, triadic, operatic style to portray the Shakespearean lead, Petruchio. However, he deftly combines it with a unique “patter” section, musically mimicking an Italian boat song, simultaneously (and fittingly) evoking the amorous exploits of Mozart’s “Don Giovanni” while incorporating those sly, Porter internal rhymes, such as “Lisa” with “you gave a new meaning to the leaning Tower of Pisa.” Masterfully, Porter heightens the comic impact of his lyrics with overly expressive harmonies, fluctuations between major and minor, tempo changes and even an operatic cadenza.

Replete with such moments, the score for “Kiss Me, Kate” is a study of compositional mastery in the service of the musical stage...all captured beautifully on Columbia’s original cast album.

As stated earlier, the 1940’s were a difficult time for Porter. He contended with continuous pain from his shattered legs, professional setbacks and a keen awareness that musical theatre tastes were shifting--with the impacts of World War II and the new emphasis on more substantive libretti and more universal themes than those available to Porter during his earlier years. Porter had to reimagine his approach to musical theatre after four decades in the field. Yet, with the deft hand of a master, he totally integrated the Spewacks’ first rate, complex libretto’s play-within-a-play format, seamlessly transitioning from dialogue into song and meticulously crafting music and lyrics to reflect every nuance of style, timeframe and character. At the height of his powers, Porter demonstrates his ability to write music in a dizzying variety of genres, reflecting the duality of the script (two centuries, 400 years apart), each number capturing its own moment of drama and characterization with far more economy of means and power than words alone could achieve. Textually, Porter effortlessly alternates between Shakespeare’s elegant phrases and colloquial English and utilizes his classical musical training, employing organic thematic development, a rich harmonic language and techniques such as *ostinato*, secondary dominants, *rubato*, modulations, modal ambiguity, and deceptive cadences, among others, to lend his music its internal logic, sense of cohesion and inevitability. Clearly, Porter still draws on previous features of his style, such as humorous patter sections, internal rhymes, a highly literate vocabulary, the use of verse/refrain forms, as well as many varieties of musical styles. Yet, in this score, he transcends his earlier work--perhaps due to having such a fine libretto, to the maturation of his skills and spirit or to his recognition that post-World War II audiences wanted “more.” In “Kate,” his work exhibits a new cohesiveness throughout the score, more nuanced characterizations, and a sophisticated, seamless sense of structural integrity. The emotional

depth and timeless quality of the “Kiss Me, Kate” score set it apart as a personal triumph for Porter and a true marvel of musical theatre.

For three decades, Lynn Laitman Siebert has taught music history, theory, analysis, performed and conducted at Baruch College, Drew University and College of St. Elizabeth and continues to perform as a solo and chamber violinist. She authored a two-volume study on the music of Cole Porter, the lead essay in the 2012 monograph, “Lyanne Malamed: Eternal Woman” and the chapter on “Kiss Me, Kate” in the 2016 “The Cole Porter Companion.” She is currently Director of Arts Participation & Communications at Morris Arts (Morristown, NJ).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.