

“The Sound of Music” (1965)

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Essay by Julia Hirsch (guest post)*



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“The Sound of Music” remains one of the most popular American movies of all time and its musical compositions have become an iconic part of our American culture.

The story of “Music’s” heroine, Maria von Trapp, has had many iterations. First, of course, was the real life of a spirited, rebellious and deeply complicated woman named Maria von Trapp. Orphaned at a young age, Maria became the ward of an abusive uncle where she rebelled by joining the Nonnberg Abbey in Salzburg, Austria. Maria’s athletic free spirit, however, didn’t mix with a staid traditional convent in which the nuns hadn’t looked out a window in 50 years! As a diversion, Maria was sent to the home of retired naval captain, Georg von Trapp, to be governess to his bedridden daughter. Soon Maria and the Captain fell in love and married. Maria became mother to his seven children, and she and the Captain had three more children of their own and, discovering that the family naturally harmonized together, Maria convinced them all to compete in singing festivals around Salzburg and Europe where they became well known as the “Trapp Family Singers.”

Then Hitler invaded Austria, and the Captain was ordered to return to naval service. Unable to work under the Third Reich, the Captain and Maria, with their *ten* children in tow (one in utero), escaped Austria and eventually moved to America where they continued their singing career. Maria’s autobiography, “The Story of the Trapp Family Singers,” was turned into two very popular German films, “Die Trapp Familie” and “Die Trapp Familie in Amerika.” Then America beckoned, and Paramount Pictures bought the US film rights for the German movies, thinking an American version might be a good vehicle for their rising star Audrey Hepburn. Yet, when Paramount director Vincent Donehue viewed the German films, he decided the story would, instead, make a perfect Broadway musical for his dear friend, and musical legend, Mary Martin. Martin loved the idea of playing Maria and hired playwright Lindsay Crouse to write the play and Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein to compose the music. One night, Hollywood

screenwriter Ernest Lehman went to see the show and fell in love with it. He convinced the president of 20th Century-Fox to buy the rights for the film from Paramount Pictures and make their own version.

And, so, finally, the life story of the little orphan girl, Maria von Trapp, became the movie that we still watch on television every year with our children and grandchildren because it just makes us feel so darn good!

An enormous part of what makes us so giddy is the brilliant Rodgers and Hammerstein score. From the nun's quiet hymn, "Dixit Dominus," to the inspiring "Climb Every Mountain," each number is authentic and evocative of the moment it represents, yet not every song from the play made it to the film. When Ernest Lehman was hired to take the stage play and open it up to large-screen Technicolor, his first order of business was to rearrange the music. By reordering the songs and, sometimes, eliminating numbers all together, he was able to expand the story to the lavish beauty of the Austrian Alps yet also create a more concise screenplay.

For example, when the play opens, the nuns are on stage chanting "Dixit Dominus." Then, in the *following* scene, Maria sits on a tree branch singing "The Sound of Music." Lehman switched these two numbers, thus opening the movie with the thrilling, more buoyant "Music." In the play, the Mother Abbess and Maria sing "My Favorite Things" together because it's a song they both remember from childhood. In Lehman's version, Maria uses this song as a vehicle to distract the children from the disquieting thunderstorm. Lehman even devised the idea of using "Do, Re, Mi" as a way to advance time and show how the children bond with their new governess. In the stage play, Maria sits in one place while teaching the children the fundamentals of music. In the film version, Maria teaches the children the tune in a number of locations, all dressed in different costumes to demonstrate the passage of time and also as a means to display the newfound trust and affection felt between Maria and the children.

Lehman deleted three songs entirely from the movie. "How Can Love Survive" and "No Way to Stop It" were sung by the secondary characters, Elsa and Max. Lehman viewed them as weak and not really necessary for the film version. "An Ordinary Couple," which Maria and the Captain sing to each other after they fall in love, was deleted as well and replaced with "Something Good," the lovely romantic tune Maria and the Captain sing to each other in the gazebo.

Another song written specifically for the movie version was "I Have Confidence." Associate producer Saul Chaplin felt there should be a musical number to depict Maria's emotional arc as she travels from the comfortable confines of the abbey to the unknown of the Captain's house. At first, Maria is terrified to leave the convent, afraid she's not qualified to be a governess to seven children, but the new song allowed the audience to witness Maria's thought process as she convinces herself she's up to the task.

Rodgers wrote these two new songs without Hammerstein because his partner had died in 1960, nine months after the Broadway play opened. In fact, the very last song that Oscar Hammerstein ever wrote was "Edelweiss," a tune so evocative of Austrian folk songs that audiences around the world are still convinced that "Edelweiss" is actually the country's official ballad.

There was never a question that Julie Andrews could perform her own musical numbers in the film, but director Robert Wise was not as confident about some of the other actors. In fact, background singers were used to fill out the voices of the seven children and Peggy Wood's voice was dubbed by singer Margery McKay. Then there was Christopher Plummer. His voice just didn't seem strong enough, yet Plummer convinced Wise to allow him to score his own songs on the original track. Then, when the film was completed and they were in post-production, Plummer could have the option to listen to his voice and decide if they should use it or hire another singer to dub his vocals in the film.

When the fateful day arrived and Plummer listened to his own voice on tape, he agreed with Robert Wise that his voice was not powerful enough and ghost-singer Bill Lee was hired to dub the actor's voice. "If I had been singing with someone other than Julie Andrews," Plummer told Wise, "my voice might have been okay to use, but Julie's voice is so perfect."

After the movie was released, the soundtrack album on RCA Records went gold and then platinum and is still, to this day, one of the most popular musical soundtracks in American history. And when a "Sound of Music' Sing-Along" arrives in any town USA, you can bet we all know the words.

Julia Antopol Hirsch is the former story editor for Robert Wise Productions and wrote, "The Sound of Music: The Making of America's Favorite Movie," the definitive account of the making of the film.

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