

“The Sound of Music” (1965)

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Essay by Caryl Flinn (guest post)*



Rodgers & Hammerstein



Original album



Julie Andrews

There’s no question that the enduring popularity of “The Sound of Music” has been enhanced by its soundtrack, which has performed as robustly as the movie. Although many don’t consider Rodgers and Hammerstein’s songs for the show their best, it has been, by far, their most beloved and successful nearly from its debut. Released on March 2, 1965, the soundtrack went gold before “The Sound of Music” even premiered on April 1st. Its release gave consumers an early taste of an already well-publicized cinematic event (opening night in New York involved assigned, VIP seats only), and the recording introduced them to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s enjoyable songs for the show. Some may have known the majority of songs from the 1959 stage show with Mary Martin, but this soundtrack offered the radiant, crystalline voice of Julie Andrews.

The English star had taken the US musical scene by storm in 1956, starring in Lerner & Lowe’s “My Fair Lady,” and smashed records for the longest-running Broadway show up to that time. The next year, more people got to see her when she appeared in a live, broadcast version of “Cinderella” in 1957 (again, Rodgers & Hammerstein); and in 1964, Andrews’s performance as “Mary Poppins” captivated audiences—especially, women and children—and won her an Oscar. Director Robert Wise then scooped her up for “Music” before “Poppins” was even released, based solely on rushes he’d seen at Disney. The character of “Maria,” introduced to the world by Mary Martin onstage in 1959, would now be Julie Andrews, who would be forever linked to the film and its music.

Andrews’ bright, crisp soprano--and four-octave range--were perfect reasons to enjoy both 20th Century Fox’s film and its soundtrack. Tasked with performing seven of its 13 songs, she soloed on “The Sound of Music,” “I Have Confidence” and performed with the children and, eventually, the Captain in other pieces. The only numbers in which Andrews did *not* sing are “Maria,” “Climb Ev’ry Mountain,” and Rodgers’s adaption of liturgical music, all of which were sung by the nuns.

The trend of releasing original cast recordings (for stage productions) and soundtracks (film musicals) took off soon after WWII, with Columbia Records’ recording of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Oklahoma!” in 1947. The Columbia label quickly became the

undisputed king in the genre in the early to mid-periods, and by the 1950s, stage recordings and soundtracks were selling better than nearly every other LP genre. By the time of “The Sound of Music,” Andrews’s voice was on Columbia’s original cast recordings of “My Fair Lady,” “Camelot,” and the soundtrack for the televised “Cinderella” in 1957.

Recording companies and filmmaking studios were characterized by complex business relationships and structures. Some recording companies had deals with particular studios or with production companies, others were part of the companies themselves. A year prior to the soundtrack for “The Sound of Music,” for instance, “Mary Poppins” came out on Walt Disney Studios’ label. And although RCA Victor ultimately released “The Sound of Music,” it bears noting that Rodgers & Hammerstein Records had first rights to consider producing the LP for the film.

For people who see film musicals, soundtracks work like souvenirs. For those who don’t, or can’t, soundtracks bring them into the world of the show through the songs. The industry exploited both of these functions for, by the late ‘50s and ‘60s, they had developed the lucrative practice of releasing soundtracks *before* their films came out. Records could pique interest, generate excitement and, more to the point, serve as an advertisement for the film to come. Even non-musical films such as “The Pink Panther,” “Hatari” and “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” were releasing theme music or songs: “The Pink Panther Theme,” “The Baby Elephant Walk,” and “Moon River,” respectively, all by Henry Mancini; and such “pop” hits sold well and became implanted in audience’s minds. Heeding the trend, the “The Sound of Music” soundtrack was released on March 2, 1965, a month before the film’s April 1, 1965 New York premiere. The demand for “The Sound of Music” soundtrack was so ferocious, that record shop owners quickly sold out—especially notable as the LP was priced at over \$6 at a time when most LPs topped out at \$4.00.

Nonetheless, plenty of challenges confronted both musicals and their soundtracks at the time “The Sound of Music” was recorded. In the ‘50s, Hollywood was facing declining revenue, and the competition from television was fierce. But, however counterintuitive it may sound, the industry was willing to take a risk with musicals, a notoriously costly genre, because their sense of scale and spectacle was something television couldn’t provide.

Film musicals were in a decade of change in the ‘50s, with some steeped in irony and (untelevisable) sex appeal like “The Girl Can’t Help It,” whose song-set indicated another trend: rock and roll. Its songs consisted of established rock and roll hits performed by an assembly of popular rock acts—musical videos *avant la lettre*. Additionally, social issue musicals became more common, such Wise’s “West Side Story”; and dance figured more prominently in such musicals as “An American in Paris,” etc.

Pop, rock, and R&B had solidified their reign in recording sales, and original cast recordings and soundtracks were past their 1950s heyday. (A ‘60s soundtrack trend that “The Sound of Music” didn’t heed was incorporating character dialogue into it, a feature that would never have had the approval of Rodgers and Hammerstein for the distraction it

would create from the songs.) Along with shifting musical tastes were shifting demographics of LP consumers—they were increasingly young and increasingly inclined to purchase a hit from a star from the recording industry like Elvis Presley rather than from a Hollywood musical with Fred Astaire.

To all these trends “The Sound of Music” would be a happy exception. The film, nominated for ten Academy Awards, won five: including best picture, best director, and best music; and the soundtrack struck gold before the movie even came out! Success quickly spread abroad: in the UK, sales of the LP outstripped those in the States, and it sold even better in Norway, for reasons that one can only guess at.

Despite its wins at the Oscars, and its popularity with audiences, “The Sound of Music” failed to impress US culture vultures and gatekeepers, especially on the east coast. Most infamous among them was Pauline Kael, who called it a “sugar-coated lie” in a review that cost Kael her job. She liked the soundtrack no better: “[W]e have been turned into emotional and aesthetic imbeciles when we hear ourselves humming the sickly, goody-goody songs.” Most film reviewers, however, even the negative ones, acknowledged the talents of Wise and, especially, Andrews, the latter boding well for LP sales. With closer ties to the cinema industry, reviews from the west coast tended to be more favourable.

Musical arranger Irwin Kostal had worked on “Mary Poppins” with Andrews and on “West Side Story” with Wise and Chaplin, and he was signed on to “supervise, orchestrate, arrange, adapt and conduct all the pre-scoring and post-scoring on “The Sound of Music.” Kostal’s style was at once crisp and lush, maintaining precise rhythms, whether in children’s songs or military marches, or in creating a full orchestral sound when needed.

A word on Andrews’ co-star: Christopher Plummer. A skilled amateur pianist, Plummer trained extensively to sing his part as the Captain. In the end, though, his singing voice was dubbed by Bill Lee. Plummer was disappointed, but Lee had reason to be even more disappointed. For the singer garnered no credit in the film or on the LP, and in fact, his Fox contract dictated that Lee would *never* receive credit, nor royalties, for his work, for which he was paid a meager \$3,000 (in 2018 dollars, \$24,000). The singing of Peggy Wood (Mother Abbess), a well-known musical theatre performer whose career began in the 1910s, was also dubbed.

As a rule, Hollywood film musicals tend to fare poorly in Europe. Tastes for musical entertainment vary from region to region according to genre, local cultural, historical traditions, etc. Musical theatre is quite popular in the UK, much less so though in France and Germany, the latter where “The Sound of Music” failed spectacularly. Neither Germany nor Austria was interested in the US reminding them of their recent embrace of Nazism, and, moreover, they would likely have already been familiar with a pair of earlier German-language films about the von Trapp family. Produced in the ‘50s, the first recounted the family’s experiences in Europe, the second as emigrants to the US. These films featured the young Trapps’ performing traditional children’s and folk songs, as well as religious and classical music, a repertoire that resembled that of the actual Trapp children. Why should Hollywood tell their story with Broadway songs?

Once 20th Century-Fox realized that “The Sound of Music” would be such a runaway hit, they took the unusual and costly step of releasing the soundtrack in foreign languages. Its dubbing costs, which the studio fully absorbed, was half a million 1965 dollars. Fox sent Saul Chaplin to dubbing facilities in Berlin, Paris, Rome and Barcelona to scout for lead singers without any exclusive recording contracts, and then he had to rehearse and record them. He had to identify songwriters in each of the languages--all the while insisting that translations hew as closely as possible to the originals. As dubbing supervisor, Chaplin was also tasked to ensure that the spirit and overall sense of the original songs were left intact. To assist, Fox had taken photographs and recordings of Marni Nixon (the famous dubber who had appeared onscreen in “The Sound of Music” as one of the nuns), with renditions of “The Sound of Music,” “My Favorite Things” “Sixteen Going on Seventeen,” “Do Re Mi,” and “So Long, Farewell” as guides for the translators and performers. The new lyrics of the former were phonetically captured for Chaplin to review.

The process was arduous and even the simplest songs like “Do Re Mi” raised complex challenges. Per Chaplin: “The scale *do, re, mi* ...etc. exists in all languages, so it had to be retained. But...[w]hile *doe* means a female deer in English, it doesn’t in any other language.” Here were two efforts with the French and German lyrics:

Do re mi
Do re mi
Les trois premieres notes se chantent ainsi
Do re mi
 --
Do re mi
Do re mi
Les premieres notes, mes p’tits amis...
Do re mi

Do re mi
Do me mi?
Die ersten drei Noten, wie heissen sie?
 --
Do re mi
Do re mi
Die esten drei Noten sing zufällig
Do re me

As difficult as scribing new lyrics proved, syncing them to existing onscreen characters was even more challenging. When the new lyrics couldn’t sync up literally with the moving lips of the performers, they always had to conform to the rhythms, pace, and energy of both the initial singer and the song. In the end, Chaplin was happy with the work, and RCA Victor released French, German, Spanish, and Italian versions of “The Sound of Music” in 1966.

There were ways in which “The Sound of Music” was rather uniquely positioned to enjoy success outside of Anglophone countries. Compared to other US musicals, it wasn’t unknown in international markets: its previous success on Broadway had already created global ripples and sheet music to some of its songs had been published in French after the initial production. Moreover, because “My Fair Lady” had been the first soundtrack to be dubbed abroad, releasing “The Sound of Music” was less of an experiment.

The success of the soundtrack of “Sound” eventually spurred Chaplin to approach RCA about releasing a *second*, instrumental soundtrack, or one that mixed instrumental versions of, he suggested, “‘My Favorite Things,’ the waltzes played at the party, the Ländler, etc.” with some of the songs. He said up front that he’d never heard of this being done before but, he added “then nothing like SofM [sic] has ever existed before...”:

While the original *Broadway* recording of “Sound of Music” was familiar to different audiences at home and abroad, the song-set of the second *soundtrack* differed. It began early in the movie’s pre-production, when Wise and screenwriter Ernest Lehman adamantly declared that [the characters] Max Detweiler and Elsa Schraeder “will not sing,” transforming Max and, especially, the Baroness “unnecessarily [into] a villain,” as Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, co-authors of the book for the Broadway show, wrote in a polite but direct missive to Robert Wise.

Cut were Elsa’s quasi-satirical and spry numbers with Max and the Captain, “A Crazy Planet,” “An Ordinary Couple” and “How Can Love Survive?” These playful songs offered semi-parodic glimpses into norms and mores of adult life. “A Crazy Planet” helped reveal the characters’ varying reactions to Nazism; “An Ordinary Couple” depicts Maria and the Captain as supposedly aiming for a simple life together, and “How Can Love Survive?” sarcastically damns their romance for its lack of hurdles and difficulties. Such playful, adult songs weren’t missing in Andrews’s repertoire, even at this somewhat early stage of her career, as “What Do the Simple Folk Do?” from “Camelot” makes clear.

Another, more serious challenge to “The Sound of Music’s” soundtrack occurred four years before the film even went into production. Oscar Hammerstein II passed away less than a year into the show’s Broadway run. (“Edelweiss,” written in try-outs, would be the lyricist’s last song.) Though ill, Hammerstein lived to see and hear the original stage recording, which was released a mere week after “Music’s” opening.

With three songs gone, Fox hired Richard Rodgers to write new ones for the film and agreed to pay him whether they were used or not. The team wanted two pieces, one that accompanied Maria from the abbey to the Trapp estate (its working title was “Walking Soliloquy,” eventually changed to “I Have Confidence”), and, the second, the mature love song that would be sung between Maria and the Captain (“Something Good”). Inexplicably, the latter, Rodger’s rather tepid “Something Good,” immediately pleased

Chaplin, Wise, and the people at Fox when the composer first presented it. (Their satisfaction is particularly confusing in light of Chaplin's instructions: "We asked [Rodgers] for a joyous love song... Melodically we asked him to write a long, flowing melody with a very rhythmic accompaniment."): "The Walking Soliloquy," though, posed the most problems. Rodgers wasn't composing music (or lyrics) that addressed any of Chaplin's requests, and his lyrics—as anyone working in the Rodgers Collection at the Library of Congress can find---lacked the legendary combination of simplicity, force, and emotion that Oscar Hammerstein was able to deliver. Finally, and with a *coup de pousse* from Chaplin, "Confidence" got done.

After the initial release of the film, Fox kept prints of "Sound of Music" from theaters for several years, letting demand intensify and, wittingly or not, creating a sense of value and ritual around the movie. When shown on television (often played during the Yuletide season), the film's airing became an *event* in the US and UK and the broadcasts kept the songs in the public consciousness. The soundtrack, arguably, did even more. For the recording condensed a viewer's three hour film-going experience into a more concentrated contact with its songs, which, moreover, could be replayed at will and as frequently as desired. Thus long before VHS or DVD recordings, which summoned the film on demand, its *soundtrack* enabled fans to enjoy the songs, even if they had never seen the movie. The LP enabled generations of listeners to become familiar with the musical score and who can now go out and participate as audiences-in-the-know for "The Singalong Sound of Music."

Since 1965, "The Sound of Music's" soundtrack has been released several more times, and other "Sound of Music" soundtracks and original cast recordings have come and gone, along with tribute LPs and dozens, if not hundreds, of recordings by singers and musical performers covering much of the show's repertoire. The cultural impact of the LP, like the film itself, has been nothing short of overwhelming, especially as a piece of Americana. "The Sound of Music" remains among the top-selling soundtracks in history and that commercial success has been matched by critical official accolades. In 2015, "Billboard" listed it as the second best LP of all time (only Adele's "21" surpassed it). In all, a nice follow up for a film that, in 1965, Kenneth Tynan called "Singing in the Syrup."

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

