



Online Event Premieres
4pm Sunday, May 2, 2021

This is a Virtual YouTube Concert
Online until May 24, 2021

Scott Williamson, tenor
Asherah Capellaro, soprano
C. W. Markham, piano

Notes on the Program
Scott Williamson

“It’s a perfect relationship.” Comden and Green’s lyrics for Jule Styne’s song gives our program its title and describes the union of song and rhyme at the heart of the American musical. Ironic wit, situational comedy and double entendre have always been driving forces. The balances of humor and lyricism, spectacle and drama have fueled the musical comedy over the past century. Our program reflects a few of the different colors in this ever evolving yet recognizable prism.

The oldest songs on the program are from Kurt Weill. The German Jewish immigrant fled the Nazis and like many of his European colleagues, found a new home and career in New York and Hollywood. Knickerbocker Holiday was innovative in 1938 with its historic 17th c. setting (based on Washington Irving), and its “subtext of power, politics, and democracy” (Mario Mercado). “September Song” may be Weill’s most famous ballad after “Mack the Knife.” Artists as varied as Bing Crosby, Willie Nelson, Jessye Norman and Lou Reed have recorded it. Weill was the first composer Ira Gershwin collaborated with following George Gershwin’s tragic death from a brain tumor aged 38. “One Life to Live” introduces us to Lady In The Dark’s compelling protagonist, magazine editor, Liza Elliott (created by Gertrude Lawrence in the 1941 premiere).

Unlike Lady in the Dark, whose film version feature little of Weill’s and Gershwin’s score, the iconic 1972 film of Cabaret introduced audiences to songs like “Mein Herr,” “Money, Money” and “Maybe This Time.” The 1998 revival included “I Don’t Care Much” and helped Alan Cumming join Natasha Richardson and Ron Rifkin as Tony winners. The show’s gritty social consciousness echoes Weill, its Berlin setting mirroring the edgy theatre of Bertolt Brecht. In another connection, Weill’s widow, Lotte Lenya was in the cast of the original 1966 Broadway production.

“You Won’t Succeed on Broadway” (“if you don’t have any Jews”) is not a Mel Brooks song, nor is it included here, though our program’s contents support its claim. It is a show-stopping ensemble number from Spamalot, the 2004 musical version of Monty Python and the Holy Grail. In another broad swipe at the Great White Way, “The Song That Goes Like This” features the Lady of the Lake and Dennis (aka Sir Galahad) having fun with the formulaic anthem. Can you break glass with a high note? Stay tuned to find out.

While one could draft a program of 20th c. theatre selections without including Stephen Sondheim, why omit one of the most influential and innovative songwriters of the American musical theatre stage? *Company* (1970) and *Into the Woods* (1987) frame a remarkably prolific period where Sondheim reinvented the musical with every outing. *Company* is considered the first “concept” musical, in which the traditional “book” musical’s narrative was made secondary to a series of self-contained scenes. It was followed by *Follies* (1971), whose concept played with time and memory in vignettes which brilliantly paid homage to theater composers like Weill and Gershwin, Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern. *A Little Night Music* (1973) was based on a Bergman film and composed almost entirely in ballroom dance meters. *Pacific Overtures* (1976), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984) are each sui generis, demonstrating their composer’s dictum: “content dictates form.”

The contents of many original fairy tales are darker and more complex than proverbial bed-time story versions might suggest. *Into the Woods* is a case in point. Like *Sweeney Todd*, its comedic moments may leaven but cannot mask the narcissism of characters embroiled in violence. In these Woods, Cinderella, Jack, Little Red, a Witch, Rapunzel, a Baker and his wife, and a pair of Princes intertwine like beanstalk vines. They wreak havoc in each

other's lives equal to any harm caused by wolves or giants. "Hello, Little Girl" is not your typical "love at first sight" duet. The Wolf, originally sung by the same actor who plays Cinderella's Prince, meets Little Red. Sinister soliloquy meets vaudeville in a song at once delightful and disturbing. Sondheim takes us inside the minds of each of his principal characters with a "discovery" song. "On the Steps of the Palace" is Cinderella's. Its lyrics are a brilliant example of a highly intelligent character thinking through a situation using the medium of song.

*He's a very smart prince. / He's a prince who prepares.
Knowing this time I'd run from him, / He spread pitch on the stairs.
I was caught unawares. / And I thought: Well, he cares –
This is more than just malice. / Better stop and take stock
While you're standing here stuck / On the steps of the palace.*

"Don't Marry Me," with lyrics by Sondheim's mentor Oscar Hammerstein II, could be the subtitle of *Company*, a contemporary romantic comedy "about" a commitment-phobic 30-something in NYC. "Being Alive" was the third finale to the musical, a more "upbeat" ending to "Happily Ever After," which was called a "downer" by director-producer Hal Prince. "The Ladies Who Lunch" was a showstopper for Elaine Stritch's Joanne, a role since synonymous with its creator. For a meta-interpretation of the song, see Patti Lupone's version from Sondheim's 80th birthday celebration at Lincoln Center. Ms. Stritch is the one wearing a hat...