

“You Can Sing Most Anything”: The American Folk Revival in *The Sound of Music* (1965)

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One of the most popular film musicals of all time, *The Sound of Music* (1965) is in many ways very much a product of its time. As many scholars have pointed out, *The Sound of Music*, as the title suggests, is explicitly about music. It posits that music is needed to live a full and happy life as well as implying that anyone can not only love but create music. In this paper, I explore how the film indexes the American folk revival. In doing so, it attempts to create a sense of ‘authenticity’ in the diegetic music-making and connect with 1960s popular culture. I consider how *The Sound of Music* employs select elements from the folk revival in a Broadway-style score. Indeed, Hollywood’s adaptation of *The Sound of Music* aims to intersect with its historical moment by changing elements from the Broadway production. Therefore, this paper analyses how the *The Sound of Music* references the folk revival, specifically through the prevalence of the guitar and a reading of the musical numbers “Do-Re-Mi” and “Edelweiss.”

The 1965 film adapts the 1959 Broadway production, which was the final collaboration between the famous team Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. The book was written by another well-known theatrical team: Russell Crouse and Howard Lindsay. And the later film production brought together much of the same crew that had worked on the earlier, highly successful, film *West Side Story*, including director Robert Wise and screenwriter Ernest Lehman. The Broadway production starred Mary Martin as Maria Rainer and Theodore Bikel as Captain Georg von Trapp. The film stars Julie Andrews as Maria and Christopher Plummer as the Captain. The film ran for four-and-a-half years in its original release and eventually grossed \$160 million. With a budget of only \$8.2 million, *The Sound of Music* made a staggering amount of money for Fox studios. Despite its enormous popular success, the critical and scholarly reaction to *The Sound of Music* has been much less enthusiastic. For example, Terry Clifford of the *Chicago Tribune* claims that the film “is not recommended fare for those on a schmaltz-free diet.”¹ Yet *The Sound of Music*’s incredible popularity makes it difficult to ignore. And in the past ten years, more scholarly work has been done on the film. Musical theater scholars Raymond Knapp and Stacy Wolf have both devoted analyses to various aspects of *The Sound of Music*, and film scholar Caryl Flinn is currently completing a monograph.² In particular, work on Julie Andrews populates the research on both Broadway and Hollywood. There remains, however, much to be said about this highly successful film and its relationship to both the stage version and its historical context.

¹Terry Clifford, “Musical Film a Mixture of Austria and Andrews,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 18, 1965.

²Raymond Knapp includes *The Sound of Music* as part of his chapter on dealing with WWII in musical theater, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 228-39. *The Sound of Music* figures prominently through Stacy Wolf’s *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002) as she discusses Maria as a character and lesbian identification as well as in relation to both Mary Martin and Julie Andrews.

Despite its setting, *The Sound of Music* is considered a consummately American work. Richard Rodgers's music employs the forms, harmonic, and melodic language of American musical theater and follows his own stylistic hallmark of spinning out melodies from a relatively limited amount of notes and employing rich harmonies. Themes in Oscar Hammerstein's lyrics and the book by Lindsey and Crouse also reflect particularly American concerns.

The plot follows rebellious nun Maria as she is sent to the von Trapp family to work as a nanny for seven children. The vivacious Maria brings the somewhat estranged family together through music. Maria and the formerly emotionally distant Captain fall in love and eventually marry. During their honeymoon, the Anschluss occurs. Upon returning home, the Third Reich summons the Captain to take up his post in the navy. The von Trapps, however, use a music festival as cover to escape, eventually leaving Austria on foot over the mountains for Switzerland (a move which is geographically inaccurate).

Mary Martin and husband/manager Richard Halliday originally envisioned Maria's story as a vehicle for Martin taking the form of a play with a few songs that the von Trapps sang in real life. Martin expressed the thought that maybe a Rodgers and Hammerstein song or two to supplement the source music would be a nice addition. Rodgers, however, reportedly exclaimed "No way am I competing with Mozart and Brahms and Austrian folksongs – all that stuff they're singing. Oscar and I would like to write the *entire* score."³ Once the story became a musical, the relationship with and meanings of folk music become much more complicated. *The Sound of Music* references not only traditional music from Austria (largely through the Ländler) but the American folk revival.

While the real Trapp Family Singers included folk music in their repertoire, the show highlights its role in their musical development. In the context of their actual life, "folk music" refers to traditional songs that had been transmitted orally and connected to an idealized, rural aesthetic. From Maria's books, it is clear that while folk music was a substantial part of the family's musical life, their professional concerts contained a mixture of art and vernacular repertoires.⁴

In the 1940s and '50s, groups such as The Weavers and The Kingston Trio became popular and built what Albin Zak calls an "image of authenticity and connectedness to a mythical past and enduring tradition."⁵ Audience participation, informality, and a sense of non-professionalism pervaded the folk movement in the U.S. In the 1960s, folk and folk rock continued to gain popularity and extended the earlier image through artists such as Pete Seeger (now more as a soloist) and Bob Dylan. Robert Cantwell asserts that the folk revival inherently made a political statement "because it involves the movement of cultural materials across usually impassable social frontiers, from enclaved, marginal, usually poverty-stricken peoples toward the centers of cultural power."⁶ Thus, the ideal of classlessness essential to the folk mentality contains an intrinsic socio-political message. Although it seemingly has little to do with this particular popular music scene, the film's music in fact connects with many of the ideas if not always the sound of the American folk music of the time. This ideal of classlessness in particular is similarly important to the narrative of *The Sound of Music* in which a nanny from the peasant class of Austria marries a wealthy Captain.

³Qtd. in Max Wilk *The Making of The Sound of Music* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 11.

⁴Maria von Trapp, *Maria* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Creation House, 1972).

⁵Albin Zak, *I Don't Sound Like Nobody: Remaking Music in 1950s America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 63-4.

⁶*Ibid.*, 51.

At the core of the 1960s folk revival stood the guitar. And *The Sound of Music*, in both its stage and screen incarnations, features a diegetic guitar. Maria brings the instrument into the von Trapp household. Members of the real-life von Trapp family played various instruments, including violin and guitar. The emphasis on the guitar over other instruments in the musical conjures a folksy feel to the proceedings. As Raymond Knapp points out, the very presence of the guitar would index folk in its American popular form by calling to mind images from the folk revival and singer/songwriter trend for many U.S. viewers.⁷

With any suggestion of folk music comes the discourse of authenticity, which the film attempts to harness in certain songs. The use of an acoustic guitar in both the visuals and music implies a naturalness as espoused by many folk revivalists in the 1950s and 1960s. As the most musical character in the film, Maria is at first associated with the guitar. The first time she plays the instrument occurs nearly an hour into the film during “Do Re Mi.” In the stage version, Maria uses “Do Re Mi” as an icebreaker directly after meeting the children. In the film, they sing the song after the children have already warmed to their new governess. Maria frames the song as a pedagogical tool so that the children may learn to sing and entertain Baroness Schraeder. Fittingly, the group receives their lesson outdoors on a hill. As the stunning and famous opening sequence showed, nature and specifically the Austrian mountains are intertwined with Maria’s vitality and musicality. Thus, the hill provides a fitting place for Maria to impart these qualities to the von Trapp children. Furthermore, the connection between nature and music adds a layer of folk authenticity to the proceedings, implicitly linking the rural landscape and simplicity to music making. Maria unpretentiously pulls out her guitar and sits on a rock to teach the kids.

The instrumental accompaniment offers an interesting mix between a singer/songwriter aesthetic and that of a polished Hollywood studio orchestra. The Broadway cast recording of this song does not feature guitar in the same way. In the film, Maria briefly “tunes” her guitar and begins picking out an octave on F to accompany the opening vocal line. As Maria sings the heart of the song, “doe, a deer...” and so on, the non-diegetic orchestra audibly enters. The orchestral instruments begin at a very soft dynamic. The guitar remains prominent in the soundscape and outlines chords, which betokens a simplicity that the song demands. As the orchestra grows louder, Maria still plays the guitar but its sound no longer dominates the instrumentation. At this point, there is a decided disconnect between what the audience sees and hears. The visuals continue to promote a folk or singer/songwriter ideal while the sound has moved entirely into the realm of the professional film orchestra. When Maria stops playing the guitar altogether, the guitar does indeed drop out. However, it reenters in a higher register – now without Maria playing onscreen. The syncopation in the guitar with strings underneath as the children yell out the solfège syllables still emphasizes the guitar. The song eventually becomes something entirely different and presents a sort of travelogue through Salzburg. The beginning of “Do-Re-Mi,” however, strongly indexes the American folk revival through its use of the guitar, even with the nondiegetic orchestral backing.

In the stage production, casting Theodore Bikel as the Captain automatically brings about an association with the folk revival. Austrian-born singer Bikel sang Jewish folk songs in a number of albums in the 1950s, was part of the group that performed in Washington Square, and was a co-founder of the famous Newport Folk Festival. As a performer then, Bikel embodies both the traditional folk music as performed by the actual von Trapp family and the American folk movement so prevalent in the 1960s. As such, he brought the “image of authenticity and

⁷Knapp briefly mentions this very connection in his discussion of the musical, *National Identity*, 236.

connectedness to a mythical past” that folk revivalists such as Pete Seeger traded in.⁸ Indeed, this image had much to do with Bikel being cast since though both a singer and actor, he had never been in a musical before. Not only did casting Bikel as the Captain conjure folk-related associations but the creators actually shaped parts of the show around him due to this. The song “Edelweiss” was a late addition to the musical because Rodgers and Hammerstein “argued that [Bikel’s] ‘special talents’ had not been fully used in the show, and that [his] folk background and [his] guitar playing could be used to better advantage.”⁹ Thus, the most explicit reference to folksong was born to accommodate the presence of a genuine folksinger. Bikel played the guitar onstage in his performance of “Edelweiss” at the festival towards the end of the musical. Max Wilk has noted that the song “created its own aura. People automatically assumed it was a traditional Austrian folk ballad.”¹⁰

The film, however, cast classically trained Canadian Christopher Plummer – an actor who has cultivated an urbane, sophisticated persona. In doing so, the film has to work harder to establish a folk connection, particularly in regards to Captain von Trapp.

Captain von Trapp sings “Edelweiss” twice in the film adaptation; he only sings it once in the stage version. The repetition helps to solidify his association with the folk. Rather than saving the song for the Captain’s farewell to the country he loves, director Robert Wise and screenwriter Ernest Lehman use the song to introduce his newly rediscovered musicality and affirm his relationship with his country. The first time that the Captain sings occurs at home in a private performance for the children, Maria, the Baroness Schraeder, and family friend Max. The guitar plays an important role in the appearance of folk authenticity. Georg von Trapp reveals his musical abilities through a performance that visually evokes a naturalness valued by the folk aesthetic. However, the overall soundscape tells a different story. The song begins with a simple guitar pattern supporting the melody. Once the voice enters, a lush string accompaniment soon joins and eventually becomes more prominent. While the simple guitar part gives a quality of effortlessness, the orchestral background adds a level of artificiality and professionalism. Furthermore, the filmmakers ultimately chose to dub Christopher Plummer’s singing (with uncredited Bill Lee). This choice furthers the disconnect between the visuals and the sound of “Edelweiss.” The festival performance of the song is a reprise, which emphasizes his musical aptitude and love for his country. Again, the Captain plays the guitar and sings. When he becomes choked with emotion, Maria sings followed by the children and then the entire diegetic audience. The Captain has stopped playing the guitar, and the non-diegetic orchestra supports the song with a stirring accompaniment that includes Austrian cow bells.

The discourse of music as natural is reinforced by Liesl’s role in “Edelweiss” and her ability to play the guitar. While all of the children learn to sing beautifully with tight harmonies under Maria’s tutelage, Liesl, as the eldest, most obviously takes up the mantle of folksinger. She joins her father in singing “Edelweiss,” apparently remembering the song and even the harmonies from before her mother’s death. Although it has been many years since music graced the von Trapp household, “Edelweiss” has remained ingrained in Liesl. The simplicity of the song allows for her impromptu performance. Liesl is also the only other character besides her father and Maria to play the guitar. She accompanies the children singing “The Sound of Music,” presumably having learned rudimentary guitar playing skills from Maria. Liesl’s ability to play

⁸Zak, 63-4.

⁹Qtd. in Wilk, 33.

¹⁰Wilk, 34.

guitar supports the idea that music can be learned and performed by everyone and is a natural part of life.

Despite the appearance of authenticity and natural music-making, the film contains an opposition between amateur music-making and professionalism. As I have just explored, this tension occurs in the disconnect between the apparent visual and aural cues and the overall soundscape. Similarly, Julie Andrews's clear, strong, wide-ranging voice and crisp diction is plainly that of a professional singer. Yet due to their connection to nature and representation of music as natural – at least narratively and visually if not always aurally – both Maria and the Captain become symbols of the folk revival ideal.

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